Merry Christmas
Salar News wishes its readers a joyous Christmas. Our office will be closed on 25 December, 2025, and there will be no edition on 26 December.

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SALAR
DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

روزنامہ سالار بنگلور

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Indian woman murdered in Canada

TORONTO, 24 DEC

A 30-year-old Indian woman was murdered in Canada, a press release issued by Toronto Police has said. The deceased, Himanshi Khurana, was found dead in a residence on Saturday, a day after a missing in the Strachan Avenue and Wellington Street W area was filed, reported the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 6

Trump accused of rape in new Epstein files

WASHINGTON, 24 DEC

A new unclassified FBI document in the Jeffrey Epstein files shows deeper connections of US President Donald Trump with the late sex trafficker. The report cites a 1997 encounter at a high-end hotel, arranged by an unnamed woman who lured the victim and her daughters. According to one source, the victim said "he raped me" pointing to Trump, while another recounts "Donald J. Trump had raped her along with Jeffrey Epstein." However, US government has warned people to be cautious after new documents from the Epstein files. These allegations have thrust Donald Trump back into the spotlight*—PTI*

>>>More on Page 6

Centre orders ban on mining leases in Aravalli Hills

New rules redefine hills, leaving it vulnerable

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

The Centre on Wednesday issued directions to states imposing a complete ban on granting new mining leases across the Aravalli range, officials said, in a move aimed at protecting one of India's oldest and most fragile mountain ecosystems.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has also directed the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) to identify additional areas and zones across the entire Aravalli landscape where mining should be prohibited, over and above those already restricted.

"This prohibition applies uniformly across the entire Aravalli landscape and is intended to preserve the integrity of the range as a continuous geological ridge extending from Gujarat to the NCR," a senior official said, adding that the move seeks to curb unregulated mining.

The ICFRE has been tasked with carrying out this exercise while preparing a comprehensive, science-based Management Plan for Sustainable Mining (MPSM) for the region. The plan will assess cumulative environmental impacts, ecological carrying capacity, identify conservation-critical zones, and outline restoration and rehabilitation measures. It will be placed in the public domain for stakeholder consultations.

The new rules define Aravalli as a landform with 100m elevation, triggering fears that it would be destroyed for construction *PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA*

Existing mining operations will be subjected to stringent regulation and additional safeguards to ensure environmental protection and adherence to sustainable practices.

In November 2025, the Supreme Court accepted a uniform legal definition of the Aravalli Hills and Range. Under it, an Aravalli Hill must rise at least 100 metres above surrounding terrain, while an Aravalli Range comprises two or more such hills within 500 metres of each other.

The Congress, however, alleged the move could open the door to large-scale mining. Party general secretary Jairam Ramesh questioned the government's "redefinition" of the Aravallis and accused it of ignoring recommendations by the Forest Survey of India, warning of irreversible ecological damage. *—PTI*

2ND FEAT IN OVER A MONTH

ISRO's 'Bahubali' places heaviest comm sat into orbit

SRIHARIKOTA, 24 DEC

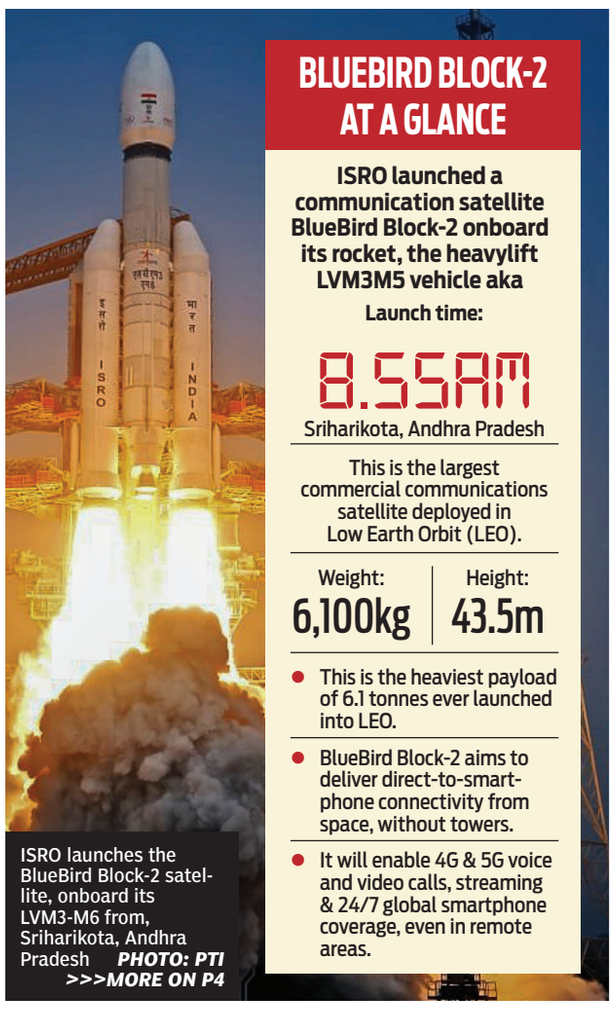
In a landmark Christmas Eve mission, ISRO's heaviest rocket, LVM3-M6, successfully placed a US communication satellite weighing over 6,000 kg into orbit on Wednesday, marking the heaviest satellite launch ever from Indian soil.

The 43.5-metre-tall LVM3-M6 rocket, nicknamed 'Bahubali' for its heavy-lift capability, lifted off at 8.55 am from the second launch pad at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre following a 24-hour countdown. After a flight of around 15 minutes, the BlueBird Block-2 satellite separated from the launch vehicle and was injected into its intended low-Earth orbit, triggering celebrations at the Mission Control Centre.

The satellite is part of a constellation being built by US-based AST SpaceMobile.

The mission was executed under a agreement between NewSpace India Limited (NSIL), ISRO's commercial arm, and AST SpaceMobile. ISRO said the satellite was placed in a 518km circular orbit, against a planned 520 km.

ISRO Chairman VNarayanan, this is the first time ISRO has launched two LVM3 rockets within just 52 days, following the earlier successful mission on 2 November. *—PTI*



ISRO launches the BlueBird Block-2 satellite, onboard its LVM3-M6 from, Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh *PHOTO: PTI*

>>>MORE ON P4

BLUEBIRD BLOCK-2 AT A GLANCE

ISRO launched a communication satellite BlueBird Block-2 onboard its rocket, the heavylift LVM3M5 vehicle aka

Launch time:

8.55AM

Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh

This is the largest commercial communications satellite deployed in Low Earth Orbit (LEO).

Weight:	Height:
6,100kg	43.5m

- This is the heaviest payload of 6.1 tonnes ever launched into LEO.
- BlueBird Block-2 aims to deliver direct-to-smartphone connectivity from space, without towers.
- It will enable 4G & 5G voice and video calls, streaming & 24/7 global smartphone coverage, even in remote areas.

HOLY NIGHT

People attend mass on the eve of Christmas at St Mary's Basilica Church in Bengaluru's Shivajinagar on Wednesday *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

1 DIES IN BLAST IN DHAKA; WB SEES STIR

DHAKA/KOLKATA, 24 DEC

The killing of a man in a crude bomb explosion in Dhaka on Wednesday triggered security in Bangladesh and protests in West Bengal, as authorities moved to prevent unrest.

Police said unidentified men hurled a crude bomb from a flyover in Dhaka's Moghbazar area, near the Bangladesh Muktijoddha Sangsad, killing a private shop employee who was drinking tea at a roadside stall. " The blast occurred a day before Bangladesh Nationalist Party Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman is scheduled to return home after 17 years in exile. In West Bengal, pro-Hindu groups and BJP supporters staged protests at India-Bangladesh land ports, alleging attacks on minorities in the neighbouring country. *—PTI*

Vadodra hit & run accused makes bail

AHMEDABAD/ BENGALURU, 24 DEC

The Gujarat High Court granted bail to law student Rakshit Chaurasiya, who is accused in the Vadodara car accident case where one person died and seven were injured. A video of the incident in March went viral at the time, where an inebriated Chaurasiya is seen exiting his car after ploughing through vehicles and screaming "another one".

Justice NS Kariel of the Gujarat High Court on Monday granted conditional bail, noting that he was just "a student" and had been in jail for nine months.

Chaurasiya's counsel pointed out that the co-accused Praanshu Chauhan, who was also the son of car's owner, had been granted bail by the lower court in Vadodara on the ground that his arrest was "unauthorised". Chaurasiya's counsel said he had "no antecedents until the accident... and had no intention to run away from the scene of the accident as he was apprehended from the scene while Chauhan had escaped."

Vadodara police arrested him on 14 March, hours after the accident. *—Agencies*

After 20 yrs, Thackeray brothers join hands for civic polls

MUMBAI, 24 DEC

Ending a 20-year political feud, Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray and MNS president Raj Thackeray forged an alliance on Wednesday for the elections to the cash-rich Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation to be held on 15 January.

UBT Sena functionaries said under the proposed formula, Sena (UBT) will get 145 to 150 seats in Mumbai, the MNS 65 to 70 seats, while 10 to 12 seats will be given to NCP (SP). Sena (UBT) has "left" 12 to 15 of seats where it had corporators for MNS; in a majority of these seats, the former corporators have joined the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena.

The cousins addressed a 16-minute joint press conference at a hotel in Worli, a symbolic venue located within the constituency of Uddhav's son Aaditya Thackeray.

The reunion, which the two described as a "duty toward Maharashtra," laid special emphasis on consolidating the 'Marathi manoos' (sons of the soil) vote bank to counter the ruling Mahayuti coalition.

"Mumbai's mayor will be Marathi, and he will be ours," announced Raj Thackeray. This is seen as a signal of a joint push by both the factions to reclaim the civic body which has been ruled by the undivided Sena for 25 years.

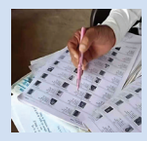
Earlier in the morning, Raj and Uddhav paid respects to Bal Thackeray at his memorial in Shivaji Park before driving to the press conference venue together in Raj's vehicle. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 3

Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray, and MNS Chief Raj Thackeray in Mumbai on Wednesday *PHOTO: PTI*

OVER 3.68 CRORE VOTERS DELETED IN SIR

The Election Commission has deleted 3.68 crore voters across 10 states and Union Territories in the second round of the Special Investigation Revision. While the EC calls it roll-cleaning, the Opposition alleges minorities are being targeted and removed. Here's a look at the number of deletions



Tamil Nadu:	97L
Gujarat:	73.73L
West Bengal:	58L
Rajasthan:	44L
Madhya Pradesh:	42.74L
Chhattisgarh:	27.34L
Kerala:	24.08L
Puducherry:	1.03L
Andaman & Nicobar:	64,000
Lakshadweep:	16,000

Unnao rape survivor's mom manhandled

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Paramilitary personnel allegedly manhandled the mother of the Unnao rape survivor on Wednesday, preventing the duo from addressing the media over relief granted to former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar.

The survivor and her mother have been protesting the Delhi High Court's decision to suspend Sengar's jail sentence while his appeal against conviction in the rape case remains pending. On Tuesday night, the survivor, her mother and lawyer-activist Yogita Bhayana staged a protest at India Gate, following which they were detained.

On Wednesday morning, they planned to speak to the media at Mandi House. However, the CRPF-escorted bus in which they were travelling did not stop there. Soon after, visuals showed the survivor's elderly mother standing at the gate of the moving bus, with CRPF personnel allegedly elbowing her and asking her to get down. There were reportedly no women CRPF personnel on board, despite the bus transporting the survivor and her mother. After being repeatedly pushed, the woman jumped off the moving bus, while the vehicle drove away with the survivor still inside.

CRPF personnel allegedly elbowed her *PHOTO: SCREENGRAB*

> **If I was not married and I did not have children, I would have committed suicide in front of the judge. The judge did not see the victim and gave the judgment**
>
> —Unnao rape survivor

Later in the day, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi met the survivor and her mother at his mother Sonia Gandhi's residence at 10, Janpath. Calling the incident disturbing, Gandhi said India was not only becoming a "dead economy" but also a "dead society".

The survivor urged Gandhi to help secure a top lawyer to move the Supreme Court, a request he promised to support. The family also sought assistance for relocation to a Congress-ruled state citing security fears. Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi assured the family of all help. *—PTI*

3 blackbucks shot dead in Chikkkamgaluru

CHIKKKAMGALURU, 24 DEC

Three blackbucks were found dead with suspected gunshot injuries in Kadur taluk here, official sources said.

The bodies were found on a private farm land close to Basur Amrit Mahal Kaval, a blackbuck conservation reserve, on Tuesday, they said.

The carcasses of two female and one male blackbuck are said to be below two years of age.

Upon receiving information from locals, Forest department officials visited the spot and inspected, the sources said, adding that they have found evidence of gunfire at the spot and signs of vehicular movement nearby.

According to officials, a case has been registered, and further investigation is on to nab the culprits behind.

Locals and environmentalists suspect the involvement of poachers. *—PTI*

SLIGHT RELIEF?

GRAP-4 restrictions lifted in Delhi as air quality improves

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Delhi has withdrawn GRAP-4 restrictions on air pollution control, a week after imposing the strictest measures amid worsening air quality. The decision follows an improvement in pollution levels, aided by stronger winds.

With the rollback, older vehicles that were taken off the roads under GRAP-4 can resume operations in the national capital. The Delhi government has also ended the requirement for schools to conduct classes up to Class 11 (except Class 10) in hybrid mode, allowing a return to normal physical classes.

After nearly a fortnight of hazardous smog, Delhi's 24-hour average air quality index (AQI) improved to 271 on Wednesday, placing it in the 'poor' category. This marked a sharp improvement from the 'severe' AQI of 412 recorded at 4 pm on Tuesday, according to Central Pollution Control Board data.

The GRAP sub-committee said air quality in the Delhi region had improved but cautioned that forecasts by IMD and IITM indicate a possible rise in AQI in the coming days due to slower winds. GRAP-4 had been imposed after AQI crossed 450, entering the 'severe-plus' category. Measures under GRAP 1 to 3 will continue to remain in force. *—PTI*

> **Delhi is suffering badly due to pollution today. When I personally stay in Delhi for two days, I develop a throat infection**
>
> —Nitin Gadkari, Union Minister

An anti-smog gun sprays water to control pollution at Kartavya Path, in New Delhi on Sunday. *PHOTO: ANI*

Ailing tigress dies at Mysuru Zoo

MYSURU, 24 DEC

Tayavva, a five-year-old tigress, died at Mysuru Zoo in the early hours of Wednesday. The tigress, aged four years and ten months, had been suffering from a haemoprotozoan disease and was undergoing treatment for the past ten days. Rescued by forest department officers in 2021 and rehabilitated at the zoo, Tayavva's health deteriorated overnight, leading to her death at 3.45 am, according to the executive director of Chamarajendra Zoological Gardens.Her passing marks a sad loss for the zoo and conservation efforts. —*Salar News*

City ACP caught accepting Rs 30,000 bribe

BENGALURU, 24 DEC

An ACP was arrested red-handed in Bengaluru while receiving a bribe of Rs 30,000 from a hotel manager, Lokayukta officials said. Malleswaram sub-division Assistant Commissioner of Police Krishna Murthy was arrested by the officials. Complainant Sanjay Kumar, who is a hotel manager in Rajajinagar had approached the Lokayukta alleging that the ACP was pestering him to pay a bribe of Rs 50,000 to allow him to open the hotel beyond the permissible time, Lokayukta officials said. They said Kumar persuaded the accused to accept Rs 30,000 for the time being. While accepting money on Wednesday, the Lokayukta sleuths nabbed the ACP red-handed. —*PTI*

Farmers advised to take up bivoltine silkworm rearing

MYSURU, 24 DEC

Joint Director of Sericulture Prathibha HR stressed the significance of bivoltine silkworm rearing, mechanisation, wider mulberry spacing, and optimal use of government subsidies to boost cocoon quality and productivity. She inaugurated Reshme Divas, A Day with Farmers at CSB-CSRTI campus on Wednesday, urging participants to utilise technical sessions on improved mulberry variety AGB-8, integrated pest management, organic fertilisers, and drip fertigation. CSB member BS Nanjundaswamy highlighted occupational health hazards in sericulture, while Deputy Director HC Nagendrappa detailed free input distribution and new disease management technologies. Farmers interacted with scientists on pest control, mulberry spacing, cocoon pricing, and hybrid adaptability. CSRTI Director Dayananda encouraged adoption of climate-resilient silkworm hybrids. Certificates of Appreciation were awarded to six farmers for bivoltine practices. —*Salar News*

BJP sweeps local body polls in B'luru Rural, DK, Raichur

BYV attributes win to Cong's failures, anti-incumbency

BENGALURU, 24 DEC

State BJP President BY Vijayendra, BJP national General Secretary (organisation) BL Santosh, Leader of Opposition in the Assembly R Ashoka **PHOTOS: X**

The BJP on Wednesday swept the general elections held for four town panchayats. The saffron party termed it as a clear rejection of the Congress government's "failures and misgovernance" in the State. The party also won bypolls held for one ward each at a City Municipal Council in Bengaluru Rural district, and at a town panchayat in Raichur district, respectively.

The elections were held on 21 December.

The BJP won 47 of the total 76 wards in Bashettihalli (Bengaluru Rural district), Bjape (Dakshina Kannada), Kinnigoli (Dakshina Kannada), and Manki (Uttara Kannada) town panchayats, as per the State Election Commission release.

While the ruling Congress, won 23 wards, JD(S) has won in one, SDPI 3 and others 2, it said.

The BJP also won bypolls held for Doddaballapura City Municipal Council (Bengaluru Rural) and Turvihala town panchayats (Raichur).

Out of 19 wards in Bashettihalli town panchayat, BJP won 14, Congress 3 and JD(S) 1; out of 19 wards in Bajpe – BJP won 11, Congress 4, SDPI 3; out of 18 wards in Kinnigoli – BJP won 10 and Congress 8; and of 20 wards in Manki – BJP won 12 and Congress 8.

BJP national General Secretary (organisation) BL Santosh said on X that, "BJP continues its winning streak in local body elections across the country. Today it is Karnataka, under Congress rule with ballot paper."

BJP State President BY Vijayendra said the people of Karnataka have once again reaffirmed their faith in the "Viksit Bharat" vision laid down by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, by choosing development, stability and principled governance.

"The resounding BJP victories reflect the people's clear rejection of the Congress government's failures and misgovernance in Karnataka," he posted on X.

Even in Bhatkal, represented by a minister from Congress, voters decisively rejected the ruling party, underscoring the strong anti-incumbency sentiment across the State, he said. "These results clearly indicate the shifting political mood in Karnataka".

He said that "I extend my heartfelt congratulations to all the winning candidates and applaud the efforts of our dedicated Karyakartas, the true backbone of BJP." —*PTI*

AFTER VIJAY HAZARE SNUB

'KSCA didn't comply with safety measures at Chinnaswamy'

BENGALURU, 24 DEC

Home Minister G Parameshwara on Wednesday said permission to host cricket matches at Bengaluru's M Chinnaswamy Stadium has been denied as the Karnataka State Cricket Association (KSCA) has failed to comply with safety and security requirements.

He advised the KSCA to implement the recommendations of the Justice John Michael Cunha Commission, constituted to probe the June 4 stampede outside the stadium during Royal Challengers Bengaluru's IPL victory celebrations, in which 11 people died. "No hasty decision will be taken. Everything must happen within the framework of law," Parameshwara said.

The decision follows the denial of permission to hold a Vijay Hazare Trophy match at the stadium on 24 December, even without spectators, as confirmed by Bengaluru Police Commissioner Seemanth Kumar Singh.

Parameshwara said that after a new KSCA administration led by former cricketer Venkatesh Prasad sought permission to resume matches, the cabinet authorised him to decide on the matter. A committee headed by Greater Bengaluru Authority Commissioner Maheshwar Rao, with senior police and departmental officials, inspected the stadium on Monday. The Justice Cunha Commission reportedly held the stadium's design and structure to be unsuitable and unsafe for mass gatherings, recommending adequate entry and exit gates, dedicated queuing and circulation zones, emergency evacuation plans in line with international norms, and sufficient parking. Parameshwara said at least the short-term recommendations must be implemented before requests can be reconsidered.

Meanwhile, KSCA spokesperson Vinay Mruthyunjaya said Vijay Hazare Trophy matches have been shifted to the BCCI Centre of Excellence near Kempegowda International Airport —*PTI*

BJP to protest 'non-release' of Gruha Lakshmi funds

BENGALURU, 24 DEC

BJP leader and R Ashoka on Wednesday announced that the party would launch Statewide protests over the alleged non-disbursal of funds under the Gruha Lakshmi scheme. He also said the BJP would urge Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot not to give assent to the Karnataka Hate Speech and Hate Crimes (Prevention) Bill passed during the Winter Session.

The Opposition Leader said that around Rs 5,000 crore meant for the Gruha Lakshmi scheme for February and March had not been disbursed. "The government dodged the issue and the finance department covered it up".

Gruha Lakshmi, one of the State government's five guarantees, promises Rs 2,000 per month to women heads of families belonging to the economically weaker sections.

Ashoka said that if the government had funds, it would have released them, accusing it of either cheating beneficiaries or running out of money. He alleged that 1.26 crore families were anxiously waiting for the payments and accused Women and Child Development Minister Laxmi Hebbalkar of not responding to queries in the Assembly. Calling it a "big scam", he questioned whether the funds were allocated in the budget and, if so, where the money had gone. He further alleged that ministers had pressured district authorities not to share details when the BJP sought information. —*PTI*

LOKAYUKTA RAIDS ZAMEER KHAN'S AIDE

BENGALURU, 24 DEC

> **As far as I know, Sarfaraj Khan inherited property from his family. I do not know why the Lokayukta raided his residence**
>
> -BZ Zameer Ahmed Khan, Housing Minister

The Lokayukta sleuths on Wednesday conducted searches on properties linked to Sardar Sarfaraz Khan, a senior official curently on deputation to the Karnataka Housing Department. Sarfaraz Khan is considered close to the Karnataka Housing, Hajj and Waqf Minister B Z Zameer Ahmed Khan.

"Today, searches are being carried out in Bengaluru in premises linked to Sardar Sarfaraz Khan, on deputation to Housing Department from Directorate of Co-operative department," a Lokayukta official said. Sarfaraz Khan was earlier Joint Commissioner in the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). —*PTI*

CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

On Christmas eve, Father Ayokyaswamy Sabastin places a crib at St. Mary's Basilica Church at Shivajinagar; a massive snowman outside M5 Mall, Electronics City in Bengaluru, Wednesday **PHOTOS: MOHAMMED ASAD/X**

B'luru Archbishop extends Christmas greetings

BENGALURU, 24 DEC

The Archbishop of Bengaluru, Peter Machado, extended Christmas greetings to the City. "On this blessed occasion of Christmas, I appeal to all people of goodwill to recommit themselves to peace, unity, and harmony. Let our homes, neighbourhoods, and communities become places of dialogue, care for the poor, and concern for the vulnerable," Machado said in a statement. "Christmas calls us to replace hatred with humanity, division with dialogue, and fear with hope."

Machado also reflected on 2025, saying that it was a good year albeit few instances of communal tensions. However, he noted that they were a "minority".

"We see things in a different, more positive light," he told Salar. "Such things happened, but they were a minority." —*Salar News*

140 kg of silver stolen in Chikkaballapur

CHIKKABALLAPUR, 24 DEC

A gang of unidentified men burgled a jewellery store here and decamped with around 140 kg of silver ornaments worth nearly Rs 3 crore, police said on Wednesday.

The incident took place at AU Jewellers on BB Road, reportedly after midnight on Monday.

According to Superintendent of Police Kushal Chousky, the thieves broke open two main locks of the shop's front door using a sharp object and gained entry. They looted silver jewellery kept in the display showcases, while gold and other valuables stored inside a locker were left untouched as the culprits failed to open it.

The thieves also disconnected CCTV cables and took away the DVR, leaving behind no electronic evidence. Police said this clearly indicates the involvement of professional criminals.

The incident came to light on Tuesday morning when proprietor Nandakumar and staff arrived to open the shop and noticed the front door ajar.

On entering, they found most of the silver articles missing and immediately alerted the police.

Police rushed to the spot along with fingerprint experts and a sniffer dog squad. Nandakumar said BB Road is usually busy till midnight, and the burglary likely occurred later when movement was minimal.

Two special teams have been formed to trace the culprits, and police are gathering details of similar cases reported elsewhere. —*Salar News*

PARENTS FUME

4 half-naked male teachers swim with school girls during trip

YADGIR, 24 DEC

The teachers shared the videos on WhatsApp **PHOTO: SALAR**

- Teachers of Kembhavi Government Girls' High School in Yadgir's Surapura taluk allegedly behaved indecently with female students during an educational trip.

Teachers of Kembhavi Government Girls' High School in Yadgir's Surapura taluk are alleged to have behaved indecently with female students during an educational trip.

A total of 93 girls from classes 9 and 10 were taken on a three-day trip, during which four teachers, including Headmaster MB Patil, and teachers Yamesh, Gururaj Kulkarni, and a guest teacher, reportedly entered a swimming pool half-naked alongside the female students and engaged in inappropriate behaviour. The teachers reportedly shared videos of the incident on their WhatsApp statuses, which sparked outrage among parents and the public.

Local parents demanded the immediate suspension of all four teachers and urged higher officials from the education department to intervene. The incident has created a tense atmosphere at the school, with community members condemning the actions as a breach of trust and an unforgivable violation of students' safety.

The State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (KSCPCR) has taken suo motu cognisance and directed the Yadgir Deputy Commissioner to submit a report in three days on action taken against the teachers and measures to safeguard students. —*Salar News*

FOREST DEPT LAUNCHES OP TO CAPTURE TIGERS IN NAGARAHOLE

MYSURU, 24 DEC

Forest officials have launched a combing operation to capture a tiger and tigress after they attacked two youths and injured a cow in Negattur, a forest-fringe village in Nagarahole Tiger Reserve, Hunsur taluk. The operation began Wednesday, with cages and trap cameras installed at four strategic locations following the previous day's attack.

On Tuesday afternoon, the tigers targeted Harshithgowda while he was tilling fields belonging to a local farmer, Zammer. Harshithgowda escaped by driving his tractor to safety. A cowherd who tried to intervene also survived by hiding in a pump house. During the encounter, one of the tigers injured a cow, dragging it several metres before retreating into the forest.

Villagers expressed anger over the delayed response, gheraoing forest officials including Range Forest Officer Subramanya. Assistant Conservator of Forests Lakshmikanth explained that the incidents occurred during the tigers' mating season —*Salar News*

PRIYANKA'S ONLY MOTIVE IS TO SEE RAHUL AS PM, SAYS DKS

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi's motive was to see her brother Rahul Gandhi become Prime Minister. Shivakumar's remarks come a day after Priyanka's husband Robert Varda said the Wayanad MP should be made the Congress' Prime Ministerial face.

"Priyanka Gandhi's only motive is to see Rahul Gandhi as the PM," Shivakumar said. He emphasised the party structure and said local leaders should not be commenting on such issues. —*ANI*

PHOTO: ANI

'Office boy signed key papers in Pune land deal'

PUNE, 24 DEC

In the Rs 300-crore Mundhwa land deal, an office boy working with Shital Tejwani (pic), power of attorney holder, signed key documents acting as a partner of Amadea Enterprises LLP, the prosecution told a Pune court. Tejwani, currently in Bavdhan police custody, had her police remand extended till 27 December for further investigation, as she allegedly did not cooperate. Authorities are probing affidavits and authority letters signed by the office boy to examine possible financial links with Tejwani. RTI activists have submitted additional documents widening the scope of the probe. Activists have also demanded that Parth Pawar (pic), co-partner in Amadea Enterprises, be named in the FIR. *—PTI*

Cabinet approves ₹12,015 cr for Delhi Metro expansion

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved Phase 5A of the Delhi Metro worth Rs 12,015 crore, Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said. The proposed expansion will add 16 more km of metro line with 13 stations -- 10 underground and three elevated. Briefing reporters on the decisions taken by the Cabinet, Vaishnaw said the duration of the expansion project is three years. Once the project is completed, the Delhi Metro network will cross 400km. *—PTI*

Gujarat biz man blocks road to burst firecrackers

SURAT, 24 DEC

In Surat, businessman Izardar, 58, blocked a busy Dumas road to celebrate his son's 19th birthday by lighting sparklers and string crackers, videos from 21 December show. Vehicles were forced to wait as he launched fireworks, at one point pointing lit sparklers at motorists who honked. Defending his actions, Izardar claimed, "I am a celebrity. What serious crime did I commit if I stopped you for five minutes?" He alleged rivals circulated the videos to tarnish his image and cited other local events that caused traffic without repercussions. Police have filed a case against him under Section 223 of the BNS for disobedience to public orders, noting the firecrackers caused public inconvenience and violated the Police Commissioner's notification. *—AGENCIES*

PHOTO: PTI

Delhi blast: Court extends custody of 7 accused till Jan

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

A Delhi court on Wednesday extended the judicial custody of seven accused in the Red Fort blast case by 15 days till Jan. The court remanded Dr Adeel Rather, Dr Muzammil Ganaie, Dr Shaheen Saeed, Maulvi Irfan Ahmed Wagay, Jasir Bilal Wani, Amir Rashid Ali and Soyab in judicial custody for 15 more days. The National Investigation Agency produced the seven accused at the Patiala House Court amid tight security on Wednesday, upon the expiry of their previous judicial custody period. Mediapersons were barred from covering the proceedings. The seven accused were produced before Additional Sessions Judge Prashant Sharma, who remanded all of them in judicial custody till 8 January. *—PTI*

Thackerays declare Nashik seats, mum on BMC

The elections are due on 15 January with the 227-member BMC & 27 municipal corps

>>>CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Uddhav said the parties have finalised their seat sharing for the Nashik Municipal Corporation where elections are due on 15 January, along with the 227-member BMC and 27 other municipal corporations in Maharashtra.

However, there was no clarity on the seat-sharing arrangement for the BMC polls, leading to speculation that the Sena (UBT) and MNS had not reached decision on certain wards.

At the press conference on Wednesday, Uddhav mentioned the role played by the Thackeray family in the 1950s' Samyukta Maharashtra movement which sought statehood for Maharashtra with Mumbai as its capital.

Their grandfather 'Prabodhankar' Thackeray, a social reformer and writer, was a key figure in the movement and so were his father Bal Thackeray and uncle Shrikant, Raj Thackeray's father, who played a role in ensuring that Mumbai was part of the state, Uddhav said.

In 2005, Raj Thackeray parted ways with the Shiv Sena founded by his uncle Bal Thackeray when it became clear that the Sena patriarch favoured his son Uddhav to lead the party. His uncle was like God to him but he could not work with the coterie surrounding Bal Thackeray, Raj had said then. The family bonhomie was on full display with Uddhav's wife Rashmi and son Aaditya, and Raj's wife Sharmila and son Amit being present at the conference.

In the 2024 Maharashtra assembly polls, the Shiv Sena (UBT) won only 20 of the 94 seats it contested as part of the Maha Vikas Aghadi alliance, while the MNS, which contested 125 seats, drew a blank. Following the debacle, the two parties came together in July this year to oppose the BJP-led state government's decision to introduce Hindi for Classes 1 to 5. *—PTI*

Uddhav Thackeray and Raj Thackeray during a joint press conference announcing party alliance ahead of elections, in Mumbai *PHOTO: PTI*

- In 2005, Raj Thackeray parted ways with the Shiv Sena founded by his uncle Bal Thackeray when it became clear that the Sena patriarch favoured his son Uddhav to lead the party.

'85,000 duplicate voters in Thane electoral rolls'

THANE, 24 DEC

Names of as many as 85,000 voters appear more than once in the electoral rolls in Thane, and the issue will be addressed soon, municipal commissioner Saurabh Rao said on Wednesday.

He said 16,49,867 electors, including 8,63,878 men, 7,85,830 women, and 159 third-gender people, are eligible to exercise their franchise in the January 15 civic polls to elect 131 corporators across 33 wards.

"Names of 85,000 voters appear more than once in the electoral rolls. A final decision on how to handle these duplicate entries will be taken by Thursday afternoon," Rao told a press conference.

To manage 2,013 polling stations, the administration has appointed approximately 12,650 officers and staff. *—PTI*

Thackerays alliance won't make any difference: Fadnavis

MUMBAI/PUNE/NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Maharashtra Chief Minister **Devendra Fadnavis** on Wednesday downplayed the alliance of the parties led by Uddhav Thackeray and his cousin Raj, saying it will not make any significant difference and that their coming together was an attempt for their own political survival.

Ending months of speculation, Shiv Sena (UBT) Chief Uddhav Thackeray and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) President Raj Thackeray on Wednesday formally announced the alliance of their parties ahead of BMC elections.

Talking to reporters here after the announcement, CM Fadnavis said, "Their track record is of corruption and self-interest. Their alliance is for their own political survival and it will not make any significant political difference. It is childish if anyone thinks otherwise. People will not get swayed."

Meanwhile, NCP (SP) Working President Supriya Sule said on Wednesday that her party won't forge an alliance with the Ajit Pawar-led NCP for the Pune civic polls until all the doubts and apprehensions of her party workers are addressed. Speaking to reporters in Pune, Sule said they are in touch with the NCP, and potential repercussions will also be deliberated upon if both NCP groups decide to join hands.

Additionally, BJP national spokesperson Pradeep Bhandari commented on the alliance, saying, "Two dynasts have come together. They have forged an alliance between their parties fearing defeat. The people of Mumbai want to choose development under the NDA-BJP."

In addition, Maharashtra Deputy CM Eknath Shinde alleged that the Thackeray cousins have come together only for power, and lack any kind of program for Mumbai's development. *—PTI*

UP registers FIR against 48 people for voter ID fraud

SAMBHAL, 24 DEC

Authorities in Uttar Pradesh have registered an FIR against 48 people for allegedly obtaining voter ID cards using forged documents in Bilalpat village, police said on Wednesday.

The case, filed at Asmoli police station following a complaint by revenue official Gunnu Babu, cites sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and the Representation of the People Act.

The matter came to light after District Magistrate Rajender Pensiya, during inspection of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, received complaints alleging fake voter entries. An inquiry confirmed 48 individuals secured IDs using forged documents, including Aadhaar cards.

The SIR is gaining momentum nationwide. In West Bengal, around 4,600 micro-observers have begun training to monitor accuracy and transparency during the revision process, verifying documents, spotting discrepancies, and assisting during hearings.

Each will receive Rs 30,000 for their role. In Kerala, four electoral roll observers have been appointed across all 14 districts to supervise claims, objections, and verification stages, liaising with MPs, MLAs, and political parties, ensuring no eligible voter is excluded.

Tensions are rising in West Bengal's Matua community after Union Minister Shantanu Thakur's comments on potential deletion of some community members from voter rolls triggered protests by TMC supporters. Clashes occurred at Thakur's residence, with allegations of assaults by BJP supporters. Thakur claimed his remarks were misinterpreted, while TMC MP Mamata Bala Thakur accused him of exploiting the community politically.

With 1.36 crore voters marked "suspicious" in draft rolls, the Matua community's three million members could influence over 30 assembly seats ahead of the 2026 elections, making SIR a high-stakes political issue. *—PTI*

TO REPLACE GUV WITH CM

Prez withholds nod to WB bills on varsity chancellor post

KOLKATA, 24 DEC

President Droupadi Murmu has withheld assent to two amendment Bills passed by the West Bengal government that sought to replace the governor with the chief minister as chancellor of state-aided universities, the governor's office said on Wednesday.

As a result, Governor CV Ananda Bose will continue to discharge his duties as the chancellor as before, in line with the existing legal provisions, it stated.

In April 2024, Bose had reserved the West Bengal University of Animal & Fishery Sciences (Amendment) Bill, 2022 and the West Bengal Krishi Viswavidyalaya Laws (Second Amendment) Bill, 2022 for consideration of the President of India.

Both the bills, passed in June that year, sought to replace the governor with the chief minister as the chancellor of the state-aided universities.

The statement noted that the principal Acts of the state-aided universities currently provide that "the governor shall, by virtue of his office, be the chancellor of the university."

President Droupadi Murmu during an interaction with probationers of the Indian Defence Accounts Service, at Rashtrapati Bhavan, in New Delhi, on Wednesday *PHOTO: PTI*

- Both the bills, passed in June that year, sought to replace the governor with the chief minister as the chancellor of the state-aided universities.

The decision to withhold assent comes amid ongoing debates over the role of the governor in state university administration, the statement added.

MURMU NODS SHANTI BILL

The President, on Wednesday has given approval for the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill, which was passed by the Parliament during the Winter Session. The bill includes the laws dealing with the civil nuclear sector. The bill also opens the sector for private players. *—Agencies*

Jamia professor suspended over religious question

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Jamia Millia Islamia on Tuesday suspended a professor for setting a question on "atrocities against Muslims" in a BA(Hons) Social Work examination, after it drew criticism for being "polarising and communal".

The question appeared in the semester one 'Social Problems in India' paper on 21 December and asked students to "discuss the atrocities against Muslims in India with suitable examples". It was widely circulated on social media.

An official order, signed by officiating registrar CA Sheikh Safiullah, said the university took a serious view of the "negligence and carelessness" of the faculty member who set the paper and placed him under suspension pending inquiry. A source said a reference to registration of an FIR was later removed, though officials declined to share the revised order, calling it confidential.

Students protested the decision, calling it an assault on academic freedom and demanding revocation. *—Agencies*

Report says Bihar students indulge in caste-based segregation in schools

PATNA, 24 DEC

In a damning ground report, students at a government school in Alawalpur village, Bihar, have alleged caste-based segregation, poor facilities and widespread neglect, tarnishing the image of a village adopted by BJP MP Ravi Shankar Prasad under the Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana.

Students aged 13–14 told journalists that teachers segregate children during mid-day meals on caste lines. "If a child from our caste sits with others, they say, 'Why are you sitting with them? Eat separately,'" a girl said. The students also complained of poor-quality food, claiming watery dal contained insects and rotten bananas were served as fruit.

They alleged that only three to five of the school's 10–12 teachers regularly take classes, while textbooks have not been distributed ahead of examinations. Toilets were described as filthy and often locked, forcing students to use unsanitary alternatives.

The school's principal dismissed the allegations as "political drama", maintaining that no discrimination occurs. *—Agencies*

BJP DENIES OBC RESERVATION IN UP RECRUITMENTS: SP CHIEF

LUCKNOW, 24 DEC

Samajwadi Party President **Akhilesh Yadav** on Wednesday accused the ruling BJP of denying constitutionally mandated reservation to Other Backward Classes in the Uttar Pradesh government recruitments.

He alleged a large-scale "loot" of reserved category posts over the past five years.

In a post on X, Yadav claimed that the BJP was rejecting nearly one-third of the 27 per cent reservation fixed for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) under the Constitution.

He said this exposed the party's "anti-Constitution and anti-reservation face".

"The BJP is denying one-third of the constitutionally mandated 27 per cent reservation for OBCs and showing its real 'anti-Constitution, anti-reservation' face. Now the newly appointed BJP state president should come forward and save OBC reservation from being usurped," Yadav said.

The former chief minister cited the ongoing Lekhpal recruitment in the Uttar Pradesh Revenue Department as an example.

He said out of 7,994 posts, only 1,441 have been reserved for OBCs.

Yadav further pointed out that while OBC quota was curtailed, Economically Weaker Sections were granted the full 10 per cent quota, amounting to 792 posts. *—PTI*

CHINA SEEK 'NATIONAL REJUVENATION'

China eyes Arunachal as tensions ease along LaC: Pentagon

NEW YORK/ WASHINGTON, 24 DEC

China probably seeks to capitalise on the de-escalation of tension along the Line of Actual Control with India to stabilise bilateral relations and prevent the deepening of US-India ties, according to a report by the US Department of War. It also flagged China's claim over India's Arunachal Pradesh as part of its stated "core interests".

In its annual report to Congress on Tuesday on 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025', it flagged China's claim over Arunachal Pradesh, underscoring Beijing's broader national strategy aimed at achieving the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049. The report notes that China's leadership has expanded the scope of its "core interests" to include Taiwan, sovereignty claims and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, the Senkaku Islands, and the northeastern India's Arunachal Pradesh.

- Chinese officials have described the unification of China and contested territories, particularly Taiwan, as a "natural requirement" for national rejuvenation.

Chinese officials have described the unification of China and contested territories, particularly Taiwan, as a "natural requirement" for national rejuvenation.

Under this strategic vision, a rejuvenated China would operate at a new global level and field a "world-class" military capable of "fight and win" operations, while "resolutely safeguarding" the country's sovereignty, security and development interests.

The document outlines that China identifies three "core interests" that are central to national rejuvenation and not open to negotiation or compromise. In the last few months, India and China have initiated a series of measures to normalise their ties after ending the over four-year military face-off along the LAC in eastern Ladakh in 2024. *—Agencies*

Palghar murder accused admits to similar crime in '98

PALGHAR, 24 DEC

The arrest of a 42-year-old man in connection with a 16-year-old murder case in Maharashtra's Palghar district has led police to uncover his alleged involvement in an earlier killing in Uttar Pradesh.

The accused Avinash Lalta Prasad Soni was booked in 2009 for the murder of a man over a brokerage dispute in Nalasopara. While the other accused were arrested, Soni fled and lived for years in Itarsi district of Madhya Pradesh, under a false identity.

Acting on a tip-off, police arrested him from Naigaon East on 22 December. During interrogation, Soni allegedly confessed to a murder committed on Holi in 1998 in Azamgarh, UP, along with four accomplices, police said. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Writer Vinod Shukla laid to rest with state honours

RAIPUR, 24 DEC

The last rites of renowned Hindi writer and Jnanpith Award recipient Vinod Kumar Shukla were performed with full state honours in Raipur on Wednesday. The 88-year-old litterateur was cremated at Marwadi Shamshan Ghat, with his son Shashwat Shukla lighting the pyre. Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai paid floral tributes, joined the funeral procession and said Shukla's death was an irreparable loss to Hindi literature. Poet Kumar Vishwas described his passing as the end of an era. Born in 1937 in Rajnandgaon, Shukla authored celebrated works including 'Naukar Ki Kameez' and 'Deewar Mein Ek Khirkee Rahati Thi'. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1999 and the Jnanpith Award last month, becoming the first from Chhattisgarh to do so. *—PTI*

Andhra allows Ayurvedic docs to perform surgeries

AMARAVATI, 24 DEC

The Andhra Pradesh government has approved properly trained postgraduate Ayurvedic doctors to independently perform select surgical procedures, Health Minister Satya Kumar Yadav said on Tuesday. The move aims to integrate the traditional Indian medical system with modern medicine and aligns with the Indian Medicine Central Council guidelines, 2020, and the National Commission for Indian Systems of Medicine. Eligible practitioners will be allowed to carry out 39 per cent of general surgical and 19 per cent of ENT and ophthalmological procedures, including stitching wounds, treating piles and fissures, skin grafting and managing contagious diseases. *—PTI*

Drunk driver's auto on tracks halts Vande Bharat

T'PURAM, 24 DEC

A major accident was averted when a Vande Bharat Express was forced to make an emergency stop after spotting an autorickshaw on the tracks near Akathumuri Halt in Kerala's Thiruvananthapuram district. Train No. 20633, running from Kasaragod to Thiruvananthapuram, was approaching the Varkala–Kadakkavur section at around 10.10pm on Tuesday when the loco pilot noticed the vehicle obstructing the down line. He immediately applied emergency brakes and halted the train. The autorickshaw was found abandoned and was removed by RPF, engineering staff and local police. Services resumed at 11.15pm, with no injuries reported. The train reached Thiruvananthapuram Central at 11.50pm. The driver, Sudhi, was later taken into custody on suspicion of drunken driving. *—PTI*

Unnao survivor to move SC against Sengar's bail

Describes Delhi High Court's decision 'kaal' for her family

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

The 2017 Unnao rape case survivor on Wednesday described the Delhi High Court's decision to suspend the jail term of expelled BJP leader Kuldeep Singh Sengar as "kaal" (death) for her family, and said she would challenge the order in the Supreme Court.

On Tuesday, the high court suspended Sengar's life sentence in the rape case and granted him bail pending disposal of his appeal against the December 2019 conviction. The court barred Sengar from entering a five-kilometre radius of the survivor's residence and from threatening her or her mother, warning that any violation would automatically cancel the bail.

However, Sengar will remain in prison as he continues to serve a 10-year sentence in the custodial death case of the survivor's father, in which bail has not been granted.

Reacting to the ruling, the survivor, who was a minor when she was kidnapped and raped in 2017, told PTI from Delhi that security for her family, lawyers and witnesses had already been withdrawn, heightening her fears. "If a convict gets bail in a case like this, how will the country's daughters remain safe? For us, this decision is no less than 'kaal'," she said, adding, "Those with money win, those without money lose."

Family of the Unnao gang rape survivor protest after the Delhi High Court granted bail to accused Kuldeep Singh Sengar, in New Delhi **PHOTO: PTI**

She said she was heading with her mother to protest near Mandi House and would move the apex court against the order.

Women's rights activist Yogita Bhayana, who protested with the survivor's mother at India Gate on Tuesday night, shared videos on X alleging that the survivor was

- Survivor, who was a minor when she was raped in 2017, told that security for her family, lawyers and witnesses had already been withdrawn, heightening her fears

initially prevented by CRPF personnel from meeting her lawyer. In one clip, the survivor says she was stopped despite needing to sign documents for a Supreme Court filing, and was allowed to proceed only after "orders came from the top".

A senior police officer said protesters were removed around 8.45pm and placed in a CRPF bus, with no further action taken.

Meanwhile, Asha Devi, mother of the 2012 Nirbhaya gang rape victim, called the decision "unfortunate", warning it would embolden offenders and weaken public faith in justice. *—PTI*

FRESH PROTESTS ERUPT

Army deployed in Assam's violence-hit Karbi Anglong

DIPHU, 24 DEC

The Army conducted a flag march in violence-hit West Karbi Anglong district of Assam on Wednesday to restore law and order, with police saying the situation was now under control after two days of unrest that left two people dead and over 70 injured, including more than 60 police personnel.

Director General of Police Harmeet Singh, who has been camping in the district since Monday night, said Army columns had marched through sensitive areas in Kheroni, the worst-affected locality. "The situation is totally under control now. I have covered the entire area myself," Singh told reporters, adding that arrests would follow once the situation stabilised.

Singh said mobs resorted to vandalism and arson, setting a local market on fire using gas cylinders taken from a nearby agency. He said a magistrate repeatedly declared the gathering unlawful, but the mob refused to disperse and attacked police and administration officials. Singh himself suffered a shoulder injury during stone-pelting, while IG (Law and Order) Akhilesh Kumar Singh sustained leg injuries.

The violence claimed the life of a physically disabled 25-year-old man, Suresh Dey of the Bengali community, who was burnt alive inside his house in Kheroni. The other deceased belonged to the Karbi community and was allegedly killed in police firing.

Security officials stand guard following unrest and violence, in West Karbi Anglong on Wednesday **PHOTO: ANI**

Protests erupted on Wednesday as Hindi- and Bengali-speaking residents blocked the Lanka–Kheroni Road, demanding immediate arrests and Rs 20 lakh compensation for Dey's family. IG Vivek Raj Singh appealed for calm, warning against rumours and vigilantism. The unrest followed a hunger strike by Karbi agitators demanding eviction of alleged illegal settlers from tribal grazing reserve lands. *—PTI*

Delhi HC relief for web series based on gangster Vikas Dubey

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday refused to stay the release of web series 'UP 77', which is reportedly based on the life of slain gangster Vikas Dubey.

Justice Sachin Datta, who was hearing a plea by Dubey's wife Richa seeking to stop the release, said the court is not inclined to interfere.' 'UP 77' will release on the Waves OTT platform on Thursday.

The court recorded the statement of the web series' producers that it is a work of pure fiction.

It also asked the producers to issue a public statement to this effect.

Dubey's wife said the web series would cause trauma and harassment to her.

The court listed the matter for further hearing on 7 January, 2026.

Dubey was gunned down by Uttar Pradesh Police in 2020. He was the main accused in the killing of eight police personnel in Kanpur.

Dubey was being brought to Kanpur from Ujjain when he tried to flee after the vehicle carrying him overturned, according to police. *—PTI*

Outrage in Odisha after minor raped & murdered, 1 held

ODISHA, 24 DEC

A 10-year-old girl was allegedly raped and murdered in Odisha's Bhadrak district, triggering massive public outrage. Locals demolished the accused's house, police said Wednesday.

The victim's body was found near a bush in Chandbali on Tuesday evening, hours after she was reported missing. Bhadrak Superintendent of Police Manoj Kumar Rout confirmed one arrest from Jagatsinghpur district.Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi announced Rs 10 lakh assistance for the kin and directed officials to ensure a proper investigation and "strictest possible punishment." The CMO expressed "profound grief" over the "unprecedented incident."

Opposition BJD and Congress called a six-hour Chandbali block bandh for Thursday. BJD workers protested outside the CM's residence, accusing the BJP government of failing to curb crimes against women. Enraged locals blocked roads and gheraoed the local police station. After identifying the suspect, a mob stormed and razed his Rampalli village house. "The accused involved was swiftly arrested," said Deputy CM Pravati Parida. Law Minister Pritihivraj Harichandan stated police have a free hand for stringent action. *— PTI*

Film director Kunju Muhammad arrested in molestation case

T'PURAM, 24 DEC

Malayalam film director and MLA PT Kunju Muhammad was arrested on Tuesday in connection with an alleged molestation case involving a woman associated with the cinema industry, police said.

Police said Muhammad appeared before investigators at the Cantonment Police Station in Thiruvananthapuram, where his arrest was formally recorded. He was later released on bail, in line with prior court directions.

Earlier this month, the Cantonment police registered a case following a complaint alleging that Muhammad molested the woman at a hotel where they were staying while selecting Malayalam films for the recently held International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK).

- Earlier, the Cantonment police filed a case after a complaint alleging that Muhammad molested the woman at a hotel where they were staying

The Thiruvananthapuram Additional District and Sessions Court had earlier directed Muhammad to appear before the investigating officer within seven days and cooperate with the probe. The court also ordered that he be released on bail if arrested during the investigation.

Muhammad is a filmmaker and producer and has served as a Left-supported independent MLA in Kerala. *—PTI*

MARKS 8 LVM3 SUCCESSES

ISRO hails most accurate heavy launch

SRIHARIKOTA, 24 DEC

Highlighting the significance of the mission, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) Chairman V Narayanan said the LVM3-M6 flight achieved the best orbital injection accuracy ever recorded from Indian soil.

"We targeted a 520 km circular orbit and placed the satellite at 518.5 km altitude. This is among the best launches anywhere in the world," he told reporters.

Narayanan noted that this was the first time ISRO had launched two LVM3 rockets within just 52 days, following the successful LVM3-M5 mission on November 2.

With this launch, India has now placed 434 satellites into space for 34 countries, underscoring the country's growing

Success of LVM3-M6 boosts confidence in Gaganyaan programme

-V Narayanan, ISRO Chairman

stature in the global commercial launch market.

The BlueBird Block-2 satellite is designed to deploy next-generation cellular broadband directly to standard smartphones.

AST SpaceMobile aims to build the world's first space-based cellular broadband network for both commercial and government use.

The company has already launched five BlueBird satellites in September 2024 and has partnerships with more than 50 mobile operators globally.

The LVM3-M6, also known as GSLV-MkIII, is a three-stage launch vehicle powered by two S200 solid rocket boosters, a liquid core stage and a cryogenic upper stage.

The boosters were developed by ISRO's Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, while the cryogenic engine was built by the Liquid Propulsion Systems Centre.

The space mission marked the sixth operational flight of LVM3 and its third dedicated commercial mission.

The rocket has now completed eight consecutive successful launches, including the launch of Chandrayaan-2 and Chandrayaan-3, reinforcing ISRO's reliability in the heavy-lift aspects. *—PTI*

ISRO launches the BlueBird Block-2 communication satellite onboard its launch vehicle LVM3-M6 from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Sriharikota, AP **PHOTO: PTI**

Delhi HC pushes for tax relief on air purifiers

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday flagged an "emergency situation" caused by severe air pollution in the capital and criticised authorities for failing to grant tax relief on air purifiers, even as the Delhi government intensified control measures.

A bench of Chief Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya and Justice Tushar Rao Gedela said no steps were taken to exempt purifiers from high taxation despite the air quality index remaining "very poor".

Observing that citizens need fresh air which authorities cannot ensure, the court suggested temporary tax relief. Hearing a PIL, it asked the GST Council to consider abolishing the 18% tax. *—PTI*

706 INCIDENTS THIS YEAR

BJP Vice President Anju Bhargava seen assaulting a visually-impaired Christian woman in Jabalpur district of Madhya Pradesh during a prayer meeting **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

TARGETED ATTACKS ON CHRISTIANS RISE ACROSS INDIA

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

India has seen a spike in attacks on Christians, with incidents reported across Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Uttarakhand and Delhi. The United Christian Forum said it recorded 706 incidents of violence against Christians this year.

In Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, Catholic prayer meetings were disrupted on 20 and 22 December over allegations of religious conversion.

A video showed BJP Vice President Anju Bhargava assaulting a visually impaired woman during a church gathering, twisting her arm and grabbing her face while a police officer stood nearby.

Police later said there was no evidence of forced conversion. In Kerala's Palakkad district, RSS-linked workers allegedly attacked and abused a Christmas carol group, leading to arrests.

In Delhi, Bajrang Dal members forced Christian women wearing Santa hats to leave a public place, accusing them of proselytisation.

Similar pressure led to the cancellation of a programme in Thiruvananthapuram and a planned celebration in Haridwar after objections from Hindu outfits.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India condemned the attacks and urged authorities to ensure security and religious freedom. *—PTI*

BAJRANG DAL LEADER DETAINED FOR VANDALISING MAZAR IN UP

FATEHPUR, 24 DEC

A Bajrang Dal office-bearer was detained for allegedly vandalising an old mazar in Uttar Pradesh's Fatehpur, police said on Wednesday.

Police said a group of Bajrang Dal workers, led by Narendra Hindu, gathered at the shrine in Mawai village under Hussainganj police station on Tuesday evening and damaged the structure using hammers and sticks.

A purported video that went viral showed individuals vandalising the mazar and issuing warnings. In the clip, Hindu is heard asking people to show allegiance to the Constitution, the national anthem and Vande Mataram, and threatening action against what he called a "jihadi mindset". The video was later deleted, police said.

Tensions flared in the village after the incident, prompting deployment of police force, officials said. Hindu, the Bhitaura block convenor of Bajrang Dal, was taken into custody for questioning. Police said a probe is underway and appealed for calm, adding situation remains tense under control. *—PTI*

HERE'S WHY UP WANTS CHARGES DROPPED IN AKHLAQ LYNCHING CASE

SURJAPUR, 24 DEC

A fast-track court in Surajpur on Monday rejected the Uttar Pradesh government's plea, seeking to withdraw prosecution in the 2015 Mohammad Akhlaq lynching case, alleging that were inconsistencies in the investigation. The court rejected the plea, calling it legally untenable and ordering a day-to-day trial.

The court dismissed the application filed under Section 321 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, observing that murder is a grave offence against society and that withdrawal after charges have been framed would undermine the rule of law.

Akhlaq, 50, was lynched by a mob in Bisada village of Dadri in Gautam Buddha Nagar district on September 28, 2015, following rumours of cow slaughter. His son Danish was also assaulted and survived after surgery.

Police chargesheeted 19 accused, including Vishal Rana, son of a local BJP leader, alleging they led the mob. Fourteen accused are currently out on bail.

The state cited contradictions in witness statements and lack of weapon recovery, but the court said evidence, including recovery of sticks and rods, supported the prosecution. Akhlaq's counsel Yusuf Saifi called the order a major victory.

The court directed daily hearings and asked police to ensure witness protection. The next hearing is on 6 January. *—Agencies*

With carols, Mizoram soaks in Yuletide spirit

Christian-majority Mizoram has fully soaked in the yuletide spirit, with Christmas carols and songs echoing in the streets, churches and almost every household, and people both old and young eagerly waiting to celebrate the festival.

This time, Mizoram will witness the 155th year of the Christmas celebration.

Preparations have begun in all churches, with the buildings and courtyards being decorated.

Members of different churches, mostly youths, were seen singing Christmas songs and hymns, spreading the message of peace and joy.

All streets in the state capital and other towns have been decked up to mark the festive season.

Many NGOs, churches and groups have been gathering charity and reaching out to orphanages, jails, rehabilitation centres and hospitals with generous gifts. In the state capital Aizawl and some district headquarters, music concerts are being organised to collect donations to help the poor and the needy.

"Giving presents is one of the true essences of Christmas as it symbolises the love of God," Reverend Lalhmingmawia, a pastor from Mizoram Presbyterian Church, said.

People came out in large numbers for pre-Christmas shopping in the markets in the capital as well as district headquarters.

The state government has imposed a 'no vehicle zone' in busy places in Aizawl and other district headquarters on 23, 24 and 31 December for the benefit of the public during pre-Christmas and New Year shopping.

"Markets and malls are reporting higher footfalls than previous years," Lalhlimpuii, who runs a garment shop in Aizawl's Bara Bazaar, told PTI.

The government has also organised a Christmas-related costume parade mass carol on Tuesday to convey the message of love, peace and joy on the occasion of Christ's birth.

For Mizos, Christmas is also a time for family reunion as they give due importance to celebrating the event with their families. Many residents, including students, who worked and studied in towns or outside the state, returned to their villages to be reunited with their families.

"I am happy to reunite with my family this Christmas for the first time since I have been away from home for more than 10 years," Lalthianghlimi, a 26-year-old youth from Saitual district who works in Goa, said.

Historians recorded that the first Christmas was celebrated in Mizoram's soil in 1871, not by Mizos but by the invading colonial British troops near Tuivai River on the present Mizoram-Manipur border and the Mizo warriors attacked the soldiers during the celebrations.

In Mizoram, three-day Christmas celebration starts from the evening of December 24, with 'urlawk zan' or pre-night celebration, and ends on 26 December.

While 25 December is usually sanctified for worship, during which church services, sermons and 'zaikhawm' (congregational singing service) are held to mark the celebration, December 26 is generally marked with traditional community feasts, an integral part of Christmas for the Mizos.

While bigger denominations like Presbyterian Church and Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM) will hold traditional community feasts on 26 December, some indigenous churches will organise traditional feasts from 25 December.

The spirit of Christmas is fervently high in rural areas where the celebration sometimes lasts even a week. — *PTI*

People attend Christmas Mass at St Paul's Church in Ranchi, Jharkhand, on Wednesday, while Archbishop Elias Joseph Gonsalves of the Nagpur Archdiocese places the baby Jesus statue in the manger at St Francis de Sales Cathedral on Christmas Eve; a child dons a Santa cap in Delhi

WORLD CELEBRATES THE FESTIVAL OF JOY

The world was bathed in festive cheer on Christmas eve across continents. In Cragside, Northumberland, England, the world's tallest Christmas tree — a 147ft (44.7m) giant planted in the 1860s — was illuminated with more than 1,300 lights. At London's historic Smithfield Market, a man celebrates after purchasing meat during the annual Christmas Eve auction. In Lahore, Pakistani Christians decorate the main hall of the Sacred Heart Cathedral, while in St Petersburg, Russia, a woman browses Christmas trees displayed for sale at a street market.

TALLEST CHRISTMAS TREE

LONDON

PAKISTAN

RUSSIA

Thousands celebrate X-Mas in Bethlehem after 2 years of Gaza war

Thousands of people flocked to Bethlehem's Manger Square on Christmas Eve as crowds of families and music and decorations heralded a much-needed boost of Christmas spirit after two years of war-tinged somber celebrations.

The giant Christmas tree that was absent during the Israel-Hamas war returned on Wednesday, overlooking a parade of hundreds of smartly dressed scouts playing well-known Christmas songs on bagpipes.

The city where Christians believe Jesus was born cancelled Christmas celebrations for the past two years during the war in Gaza, holding muted celebrations few decorations or lights or festive events.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the top Catholic leader in the Holy Land, kicked off Christmas celebrations during the traditional procession from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, calling for "a Christmas full of light."

"After two years of darkness, we need light," Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, said as he crossed the separation wall that divides Jerusalem from Bethlehem.

Arriving in Manger Square, Pizzaballa said he came bearing greetings from Gaza's tiny Christian community, where he held a pre-Christmas Mass on Sunday. But among the devastation, he also saw a desire for life and to rebuild.

"We, all together, we decide to be the light, and the light of Bethlehem is the light of the world," he told thousands of people, Christian and Muslim, who gathered in the square.

Despite Wednesday's holiday cheer, the impact of the war in the Israeli-occupied West Bank is acute, especially in Bethlehem, where around 80 per cent of the Muslim-majority city's residents depend upon tourism-related businesses, according to the local government. The vast majority of people celebrating Wednesday were local residents, with only a handful of foreigners mixed among the crowd.

But some residents said they are starting to see some small signs of change as domestic tourism slowly returns and hopefully will herald the return of international visitors the city depends on.

LOSS OF TOURISM

"Today is a day of joy, a day of hope, the beginning of the return of normal life here," said Bethlehem resident Georgette Jackaman, a tour guide who has not worked in more than two years. "People are desperate, but after two years, everyone wants to celebrate."

She and her husband, Michael Jackaman, another guide who is out of work, are from established Christian Bethlehem families that stretch back generations. This is the first real Christmas celebration for their two children, aged 2 1/2 and 10 months.

During the war, the Jackamans pivoted to create a website selling Palestinian handicrafts to try to support others who also have lost their livelihoods.

Young Palestinian decorate a Christmas tree in the Holy Family Catholic Church in Gaza City **PHOTO: PTI**

Christmas and religious pilgrims always have been a prime economic engine for Bethlehem. During the Gaza war, the unemployment rate in the city jumped from 14 per cent to 65 per cent, Bethlehem Mayor Maher Nicola Canawati said earlier this month.

"People are still afraid to come visit," said Georgette Jackaman. "But if people come here, we can breathe a bit of the world, even if we are living with restrictions."

"I came because I wanted to better understand what people in Palestine are going through, and you can sense people have been through a very hard time," said Mona Riewer, a physiotherapist from France.

Although friends and family abroad cautioned her against coming due to the volatile situation, Riewer said being in Bethlehem to mark Christmas helped her appreciate the meaning of the holiday.

"Christmas is like hope in very dark situations, a very vulnerable child experiencing harshness," she said.

Despite the ceasefire that began in October, tensions remain high across much of the West Bank.

Israel's military continues to carry out frequent raids in what it says is a crackdown on militants. Attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians have reached their highest level since the United Nations humanitarian office started collecting data in 2006. Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 Mideast war. As poverty and unemployment have soared during the war, about 4,000 people have left Bethlehem in search of work, the mayor said.

It's part of a worrying trend for Christians, who are leaving the region in droves.

Christians account for less than 2 per cent of the West Bank's roughly 3 million residents, a presence that has been shrinking. Across the Middle East, the Christian population has steadily declined as people have fled conflict and attacks.

But on Wednesday, many were thrilled to once again mark Christmas in the birthplace of Christianity.

THE BEGINNING OF A RETURN TO NORMAL LIFE

Fadi Zoughbi, who previously worked overseeing logistics for tour groups, said his children were ecstatic to see the more than two dozen scouts marching bands streaming through the streets of Bethlehem.

They represent cities and towns across the West Bank, with Palestinian flags and tartan draped on their bagpipes, drummers spinning mallets adorned with pompoms. For the past two years, the scouts marched silently through the streets as a protest against the ongoing war.

Irene Kirmiz, who grew up in Bethlehem and now lives in Ramallah, said the scout parade is among her favourite Christmas traditions. Her 15-year-old daughter plays the tenor drum with the Ramallah scouts, the same instrument she played as a teen scout.

But her family in Ramallah had to wake up at 5 am Wednesday to arrive in time for the parade and waited upwards of three hours at the Israeli checkpoints along the way. The drive previously took 40 minutes without the checkpoints that have increasingly made travel difficult for Palestinians, she said.

"It's very emotional seeing people trying to bounce back, trying to celebrate peace and love," Kirmiz said. "I remember the Bethlehem of my childhood, it really depends on tourism, and so many Christians have left, the streets are empty and families are suffering. But today we see a light of happiness, and we are hoping for a better peace for everyone."

The Israeli Ministry of Tourism estimates 1,30,000 tourists will visit Israel by the end of December, including 40,000 Christians. In 2019, a banner year for tourism before the pandemic, the tourism ministry said 1,50,000 Christian tourists visited during the week of Christmas alone. —*PTI*

Zia's son Tarique to return to B'desh on Thursday

DHAKA, 24 DEC

Tarique Rahman, the Acting Chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and heir to the influential Zia family, is set to return home on Thursday, ending his nearly 17 years in exile in London, his party said on Wednesday. Rahman, the 60-year-old son of ailing former premier Khaleda Zia, has emerged as a leading contender for Prime Minister in the upcoming February general elections. "This will be a defining political moment," BNP spokesman Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said. The interim government of Muhammad Yunus has ordered an intensified security presence coinciding with Rahman's return, while the BNP aimed to gather millions of supporter. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Don't want to take over Greenland: US envoy

WEST PALM BEACH, 24 DEC

US President Donald Trump's newly appointed envoy to Greenland said Tuesday that the Republican administration is looking to begin a conversation with residents of the semi-autonomous Danish territory about the best way forward. In his first extended comments since being appointed to the role this week, Louisiana Gov Jeff Landry said the Trump administration isn't going to "go in there trying to conquer anybody" or try "to take over anybody's country." The governor's comments seemed somewhat at odds with Trump, who has repeatedly said the US needs to take over the Arctic territory for the sake of US security and has not ruled out military force to take control of the mineral-

Disappointed by euthanasia bill in Illinois: Pope

CASTEL GANDOLFO, 24 DEC

Pope Leo XIV said on Tuesday he was "very disappointed" that his home state of Illinois had approved a law allowing for medically assisted suicide, and he called for greater respect for life. Leo said he had spoken "explicitly" with Governor JB Pritzker and urged him not to sign the bill into law. Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich did the same, Leo said. "We were very clear about the necessity to respect the sacredness of life from the very beginning to the very end," Leo said. Pritzer signed the legislation on 12 December. The measure is also known as "Deb's Law," honouring Deb Robertson, a resident of the state living with a rare terminal illness who had been pushing for the bill. *—PTI*

Ex-EU head banned from US for 'censorship'

WASHINGTON, 24 DEC

The State Department announced Tuesday it was barring five Europeans it accused of leading efforts to pressure US tech firms to censor or suppress American viewpoints. The five Europeans are: Imran Ahmed, chief executive of the Centre for Countering Digital Hate; Josephine Ballon and Anna-Lena von Hodenberg, leaders of HateAid, a German organisation; Clare Melford, who runs the Global Disinformation Index; and former EU Commissioner Thierry Breton, who was responsible for digital affairs. The Europeans, characterised by Secretary of State Marco Rubio as "radical" activists and "weaponised" nongovernmental organisations, fell afoul of a new visa policy announced in May to restrict the entry of foreigners deemed responsible for censorship of protected speech in the US. *—PTI*

Yunus-govt killed him to foil elections: Hadi's brother

Govt takes responsibility for Hindu man's family

Omar Hadi, brother of assassinated student leader Sharif Osman Hadi, speaks at an event *PHOTO: X*

DHAKA, 24 DEC

The brother of assassinated student leader Sharif Osman Hadi accused the interim government led by Chief Adviser Mohammad Yunus of orchestrating the murder which led to unrest in Bangladesh.

"It is you (Yunus) who had Osman Hadi killed, and now you are trying to foil the election by using this as an issue," Bangladeshi media outlet The Daily Star quoted Omar Hadi as saying on Tuesday while addressing the government.

He said his brother , who was shot in Dhaka and died six year later, wanted the national election to be held by February and, while addressing a Shahidi Shopoth (Martyr's Oath) programme organised by Inqilab Mancha in front of the National Museum at Shahbagh.

"Ensure a speedy trial of the killers so the election environment is not harmed. The government has failed to show us any visible progress. If justice for Osman Hadi is not delivered, you too will be compelled to flee Bangladesh one day," he added. Omar claimed that his brother was killed because he did not bow to "foreign masters".

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Education adviser CR Abrar said that the government will take responsibility of the family of the Hindu worker who was lynched on blasphemy charges last week.

Abrar on Tuesday met the bereaved family of 25-year-old Dipu Das, who was killed by a mob and his body set on fire.

"The state has taken the responsibilities of taking care of Dipu Das' child, wife and parents," Abrar said, calling the killing of the garment factory worker a "brutal crime which has no excuse".

Twelve people have been held so far for their alleged involvement in the murder. *—Agencies*

Sack Global TV head or we will burn office: Mob

Dhaka, 24 Dec

After various newspaper officers were attacked and set on fire recently, Global TV Bangladesh said that a mob a visited its office and threatened it. On 21 December, a group of youths demanded of that Global TV removes its head of news, Naznin Munni. If it did not, it would meet the fate of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star Sharing the ordeal in a Facebook post, Munni said that they "threatened to set the office on fire like Prothom Alo and The Daily Star". She said the 7-8 youth complained that Global TV did not cover Sharif Osman Hadi accurately. *—Agencies*

Trump accused of rape in new Epstein files

Convicted sex trafficker Jeffery Epstein, late musician James Brown and US President Donald Trump *PHOTO: X*

WASHINGTON, 24 DEC

The newly unclassified FBI documents in the Jeffrey Epstein case claim that US President Donald Trump allegedly raped a woman in the 1990s.

Trump's name dominates the tens of thousands of files that the US Justice Department (DoJ) released on Tuesday, suggesting that the Republican had a deeper connection to the late convicted sex trafficker than previously known.

One report cites a 1997 encounter at a high-end hotel, arranged by an unnamed woman who lured the victim and her daughters. According to one source, the victim said "he (Trump) raped me", while another recounts "Donald J Trump had raped her along with Jeffrey Epstein."

The file adds that the unnamed individual claimed: "Some girl with a funny name took me into a fancy hotel or building, that's how it happened."

Another file recounts a limousine driver's account of a "very concerning" phone call during a 2000 ride to an airport, in which Trump allegedly repeatedly said the name "Jeffrey" and made references to "abusing some girl." Trump was not president at the time.

However, the DoJ has said the files contain "untrue and sensationalist" claims that were made to derail Trump's political career. The DoJ was responding especially to a handwritten note allegedly by Epstein which said in 2019 "our President (Trump) love young, nubile girls". *—Agencies*

30 Indian truckers arrested for illegal stay in US

NEW YORK, 24 DEC

US border patrol agents arrested 30 Indian nationals, allegedly living illegally in America, operating semitrucks with commercial driver's licenses.

Border Patrol agents in the El Centro Sector in California arrested 49 illegal immigrants with commercial driver's licenses during vehicle stops at immigration checkpoints and in interagency operations, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said in a statement last week. Of those arrested, 30 were from India, two were from El Salvador, and the remainder were from China, Eritrea, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Russia, Somalia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

'Operation Highway Sentinel' specifically targeted commercial trucking companies in California. It was launched after several fatal accidents were caused by illegal individuals, many of whom were Indians, who held commercial driver's licenses and were operating semitrucks at the time of the accidents. *—PTI*

Trump deploys 350 Nat'l Guard to New Orleans

The Trump administration is deploying 350 National Guard troops to New Orleans ahead of the New Year, launching another federal deployment in the city as an immigration crackdown led by Border Patrol is underway. The Border Patrol has already arrested some 5,000 alleged illegal immigrants in a few months.

'60 Minutes' piece on Don's immigration policy leaked

A news segment critical of the Trump administration's immigration policy that was abruptly pulled from '60 Minutes' was mistakenly aired on a TV app. It featured interviews with migrants who were sent to a notorious El Salvador prison called the Terrorism Confinement Centre. The story recounted abuses faced by migrants.

Russian attacks have crippled Ukraine's energy infrastructure *PHOTO: UKRAINE EMERGENCY SERVICE*

Ukraine unveils 20-point plan; expects Russian response soon

KYIV/ MOSCOW, 24 DEC

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the US and Ukraine have reached a consensus on several critical issues aimed at bringing an end to Russia's nearly four-year invasion of Ukraine as the Washington showed the new 20-point plan, hammered out after marathon talks in Florida, to Russian negotiators.

A response is expected from Moscow on Wednesday, Zelenskyy said.

However, Zelenskyy said, sensitive issues around territorial control in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland, along with the management of Europe's largest nuclear plant - Zaporizhzhia - remain unresolved.

Zelenskyy briefed journalists on each point of the plan on Tuesday. His comments were embargoed until Wednesday morning.

At the heart of the negotiations lies the contentious territorial dispute concerning the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, known as the Donbas. This is "the most difficult point," Zelenskyy said. These matters will be discussed at the leaders' level, he said.

The draft states that the contact line, which cuts across five Ukrainian regions, should be frozen once the agreement is signed. The US is also proposing a free-economic zone in several contested territories.

"The USA is offering 33 per cent for 33 per cent for 33 per cent, and the Americans are the main manager" of the Zaporizhzhia plant, Zelenskyy said. "(But) how can you have joint commerce with the Russians after everything?"

BLAST ROCKS MOSCOW

Three people, including two police officers, were killed in a bomb blast in Russia on Wednesday near to the spot where a high-ranking general was killed days before.

The blast happened after two police officers spotted a suspicious individual near a police car on the city's Yeletskaya Street, and when they approached the suspect to detain him, an explosive device was detonated. All three died. *—PTI*

Cambodia: Thailand vandalised Hindu statues

PHNOM PENH / BANGKOK, 24 DEC

As the clashes with neighbouring Thailand continued for a second week, a Cambodian official accused Bangkok of vandalising a Hindu statue in a disputed border area.

"We condemn the destruction of ancient temples and statues that are worshipped by Buddhist and Hindu followers," said Cambodian government spokesperson Kim Chanpanha. "The statue was inside our territory in the An Ses area."

The statue is believed to be a Vishnu statue, and was reportedly demolished by Thai engineers on 22 December.

On Wednesday, India expressed concern over the reports.

Meanwhile, Thai and Cambodian military representatives opened formal negotiations on Wednesday, authorities in both countries said, as they seek to revive a ceasefire.

The session of the General Border Committee is scheduled to run for three days, Thai Defence Ministry spokesman Rear Admiral Surasant Kongsiri said.

The negotiations are the most substantive engagement since hostilities flared again, following unsuccessful mediation attempts by Malaysia, China and US. *—Agencies*

Libya army chief among 8 killed in jet crash

ANKARA, 24 DEC

Libya's military chief is among the eight people who died when a private aircraft crashed in Turkey.

The crash comes after the Libyan National Army (LNA) signed a $4 billion arms deal with Pakistan.

The private jet carrying Gen Muhammad Ali Ahmad al-Haddad, four other officers and three crew members crashed in Turkey on Tuesday after taking off from the capital, Ankara, killing everyone on board. Contact was lost with the plane 40 minutes after take-off. The Falcon 50-type business jet requested for emergency landing and was redirected, but disappeared from radar while descending, Turkey said.

The delegation was on its way back to Tripoli after holding high-level defence talks.

Al-Hadad was the top military commander in western Libya and played a crucial role in the ongoing, UN-brokered efforts to unify Libya's military.

The LNA and Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) agreed to a ceasefire in 2019.

GNA, which Al-Hadad was a part, is the internationally recognised government. *—PTI*

Libyan military chief Ali Ahmad al-Haddad was returning to Tripoli after negotiations with Turkey *PHOTO: X*

S KOREA PASSES BILL TARGETING FALSE INFORMATION

SEOUL, 24 DEC

South Korea's Liberal-led legislature on Wednesday passed a bill allowing heavy punitive damages against traditional news and internet media for publishing "false or fabricated information," brushing aside concerns that the legislation could lead to greater censorship.

Journalist groups and civil liberty advocates urged President Lee Jae Myung to veto the bill pushed by his Democratic Party. They say the wording is vague about what information would be banned and lacks sufficient protections for the press, potentially discouraging critical reporting.

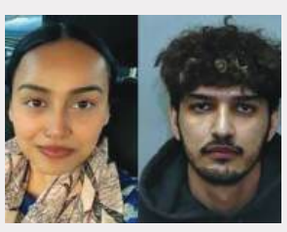
The Democrats, who have failed to pass similar legislation under past governments, say the law is needed to counter a growing threat of fake news and disinformation that they argue undermines democracy by fueling divisions and hate speech.

The bill would allow courts to award punitive damages of up to five times the proven losses against news organisations and large YouTube channels that disseminate "illegal information or false, fabricated information" to cause harm or seek profit.

It also allows damages of up to 50 million won (USD 34,200) for losses that are difficult to quantify in court. The country's media regulator would be able to fine outlets up to 1 billion won (USD 684,000) for distributing information a court confirms to be false or manipulated more than twice. *—PTI*

'INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE'

Indian woman murdered in Canada, manhunt on



Himanshi Khurana was found dead in Toronto; suspect Abdul Ghafoori

TORONTO, 24 DEC

A 30-year-old Indian woman was murdered in Canada, a press release issued by Toronto Police has said.

The deceased, Himanshi Khurana, was found dead in a residence on Saturday, a day after a missing in the Strachan Avenue and Wellington Street W area was filed, reported the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).

CBC said police have issued a warrant for 32-year-old Abdul Ghafoori, the suspect in the case, for first-degree murder and are invesigating it as an "act of intimate partner violence". Ghafoori is also a resident of Toronto.

The Indian High Commission in Toronto on Tuesday expressed shock and deep sorrow over the incident, describing it as "tragic" and "disturbing."

"We are deeply saddened and shocked by the murder of Ms Himanshi Khurana," the High Commission said, extending its deepest condolences to the bereaved family.

The Consulate said it has been closely following the matter will continue to support the family. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Rupee falls by 8P, closes at 89.71 against USD

MUMBAI, 24 DEC

The rupee pared initial gains and settled for the day lower by 8 paise at 89.71 against the US dollar on Wednesday, fuelled by persistent capital withdrawals from foreign investors, alongside heightened greenback demand from bullion importers. Forex traders said that despite the central bank's announcement of USDINR swaps and Open Market Operations (OMO), the measures failed to boost market sentiments, amid strong dollar demand and rising crude oil prices. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 89.56 against the US dollar, then touched an intra-day high of 89.51, registering a 12-paise gain before settling at 89.71, down 8 paise. Meanwhile, the dollar index was trading 0.13 per cent lower at 97.81. *—PTI*

IndiGo to launch Delhi-London direct flights in Feb

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

IndiGo will start direct flights between Delhi and London Heathrow on 2 February, 2026. The airline plans to operate these flights five times a week using Boeing 787 aircraft. This new service will provide two types of seating options for passengers, including IndiGoStretch and Economy Class. According to an IndiGo press release, the airline currently flies every day between Mumbai and London Heathrow. The carrier will operate a total of 12 flights to London each week. The Delhi to London flight, numbered 6E 0003, is scheduled to depart at 09.40am & arrive at 2.55pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Return flight from London, numbered 6E 0004, will depart at 5:15pm and reach Delhi at 8.15am the following day. *—ANI*

Deloitte, Google to offer AI-powered cybersecurity

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Deloitte India on Wednesday announced the expansion of its partnership with Google Cloud to offer AI-powered cybersecurity solutions, aiming to enhance digital security for businesses and government organisations in India. The partnership will help clients design and run modern Security Operations Centres (SOCs), transition their legacy systems to the cloud, and adopt "security-as-a-service" models. It is designed to enhance organisations' threat detection and response capabilities, ensure compliance with data protection requirements, and enable them to manage security operations without maintaining large in-house SOC teams. It will support key Indian regulations ensuring adherence to local and global data protection frameworks. *—PTI*

RBI postpones 2nd phase of quicker cheque clearing

MUMBAI, 24 DEC

The Reserve Bank on Wednesday postponed implementation of the second phase of the faster cheque clearance mechanism to provide more time to banks to streamline their operations. The second phase of the 'Continuous Clearing and Settlement on Realisation in Cheque Truncation System' was to be implemented by banks from 3 January. There had been teething issues in the implementation of the first phase that commenced on 4 October. In the second phase, the banks are required to clear cheques within three hours of realisation in the cheque truncation system. The timing of the presentation too has been modified to 9am to 3pm, and the timing of the confirmation is modified to 9am to 7pm. *—PTI*

Al Hind Air & FlyExpress: India gets 2 new airlines

India currently has nine regular domestic carriers

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Two new airlines -- Al Hind Air and FlyExpress -- are set to take to the skies, with the carriers receiving their no objection certificates from the civil aviation ministry.

In 2026, apart from these two carriers, Uttar Pradesh-based Shankh Air, which already has a No Objection Certificate (NOC), is likely to start operations.

Al Hind Air is being promoted by Kerala-based Alhind Group.

The ministry is keen to have more airline operators in the country, which is one of the world's fastest-growing domestic civil aviation markets.

Currently, there are nine operational scheduled domestic carriers in the country. Fly Big, a regional airline, suspended scheduled flights in October.

IndiGo and Air India Group -- Air India and Air India Express -- together have over 90 per cent of the domestic market share.

Concerns about apparent duopoly in the fast-growing domestic airlines' industry got amplified this month in the wake of the massive operational disruptions at IndiGo, which has a market share of more than 65 per cent.

"Over the last one week, pleased to have met teams from new airlines aspiring to take wings in Indian skies-Shankh Air, Al Hind Air and FlyExpress. While Shankh Air has already got the NOC from the Ministry, Al Hind Air and FlyExpress have received their NOCs this week," Civil Aviation Minister K Rammohan Naidu said in a post on X on Tuesday.

Schemes like UDAN, have enabled smaller carriers Star Air, India One Air and Fly91 to play an important role in the regional connectivity within the country and there is more scope for further growth, he added.

Apart from Air India, Air India Express, IndiGo and state-owned Alliance Air, other scheduled carriers are Akasa Air, SpiceJet, Star Air, Fly91 and IndiaOne Air, as per latest data from the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). *—PTI*

GOLD FALLS TO ₹1.4 LAKH

Silver hits fresh record of Rs 2.27/kg

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Silver prices surged Rs 9,750 to hit a new record of Rs 2,27,000 per kilogram in the national capital on Wednesday, even as the white metal breached the USD 72 per ounce mark in overseas markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

On Tuesday, the metal had settled at Rs 2,17,250 per kg.

"Spot silver crossed the USD 72 level as the bullion prices hit record highs in the international markets," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

During the calendar year, the white metal has risen by Rs 1,37,300, or 153.06 per cent, from Rs 89,700 per kilogram recorded on 31 December, 2024.

Gandhi further stated that a weak US dollar, expectations of dovish monetary policy from the US Federal Reserve, and ongoing geopolitical tensions continue to act as tailwinds for the precious metal.

Meanwhile, Gold of 99.9 per cent purity retreated from a record high in the local bullion market by a tad and traded lower by Rs 50 at Rs 1,40,800 per 10g (inclusive of all taxes) against the previous close of Rs 1,40,850 per 10g on Tuesday.

In the international markets, spot gold crossed the USD 4,500 per ounce-mark for the first time by rising USD 41.18, or 0.92 per cent, to USD 4,525.96 per ounce.

In the last four sessions, the precious metal has risen by USD 186.46, or 4.3 per cent, from the closing price of USD 4,339.50 on 19 December, 2025.

So far this year, the metal has added USD 1,920.19, or 73.7 per cent, from USD 2,605.77 per ounce recorded on 31 December, 2024. *—PTI*

Sensex, Nifty tumbles amid mixed global market trends

MUMBAI, 24 DEC

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty stayed on the back foot for the second straight session on Wednesday as investors offloaded energy and IT stocks amid a mixed trend in global markets.

A depreciating rupee and unabated foreign fund outflows added to the pressure, traders said.

The 30-share BSE Sensex dropped by 116.14 points, or 0.14 per cent, to settle at 85,408.70. During the day, it hit a high of 85,738.18 and a low of 85,342.19.

A total of 2,346 stocks declined while 1,841 advanced and 145 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The 50-share NSE Nifty edged lower by 35.05 points, or 0.13 per cent, to 26,142.10.

Trading volumes in the capital markets remained subdued amid the year-end holiday-shortened week.

From the 30-Sensex firms, InterGlobe Aviation, Sun Pharma, Asian Paints, Reliance Industries, Hindustan Unilever, ICICI Bank and Tata Steel were among the biggest laggards.

In contrast, Trent, UltraTech Cement, Maruti, and Power Grid were among the gainers.

The BSE midcap gauge declined 0.37 per cent, and the smallcap index dipped 0.14 per cent. Among sectoral indices, oil & gas declined 0.76 per cent, followed by BSE Focused IT (0.68 per cent), services (0.64 per cent), energy (0.58 per cent) and IT (0.44 per cent).

On the other hand, BSE telecommunication, realty and metal were the gainers.

"Markets ended marginally lower on Wednesday after slipping from their intra-day highs, as profit-booking in select sectors and continued selling by FIIs capped the upside," Gaurav Garg, Research Analyst at Lemonn Markets Desk, said.

The domestic equity markets will remain closed on Thursday for Christmas. *—PTI*

HC stays bank action against Anil Ambani

MUMBAI, 24 DEC

The Bombay High Court on Wednesday stayed all present and future actions by three banks seeking to declare the accounts of Anil Ambani and his company Reliance Communications Ltd as 'fraud', noting that the provisions of the RBI's Master Directions were violated in the process.

The action was based on a forensic audit report prepared by an external auditor, BDO LLP, noted Justice Milind Jadhav. But this report cannot be relied upon because it had not been signed by a duly qualified chartered accountant (CA) as required under the Reserve Bank of India's 2024 Master Directions on fraud, the judge said.

If interim relief was not given to Ambani and Reliance Communications, it would cause "grave and irreparable harm/loss", said the order.

"Principles of natural justice are based on the maxim 'justice should not only be done but should manifestly be seen to be done,' the HC said, adding that a forensic audit report prepared by an external auditor cannot be relied upon by the banks to issue a show-cause notice.

"The RBI Master Directions are mandatory in nature and they operate within a binding statutory framework requiring banks to engage auditors strictly in accordance with applicable law," said the order.

The court also berated the banks for their belated action against Ambani and his company and said this was a "classic case where the banks have woken up from their deep slumber" seeking to conduct forensic audit for the period from 2013 to 2017 in 2019. *—PTI*

Bharti and Warburg Pincus acquires 49% shares in Haier India

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Bharti Enterprises and Warburg Pincus on Wednesday announced a strategic investment in Haier India, a subsidiary of Chinese consumer electronics maker Haier Group, picking up a collective 49 per cent stake in the company.

The size of the deal was not disclosed.

According to a release, the strategic collaboration will accelerate Haier's growth and expansion in India by bringing together and leveraging the company's global excellence in innovation, Bharti's strong standing and resultant networks, and private equity firm Warburg Pincus' strong track record of scaling brands.

"Bharti Enterprises, one of India's most prominent and diversified business conglomerates, and Warburg Pincus, the pioneer of global growth investing, today announced a strategic investment in Haier India, a subsidiary of the Haier Group," the release said.

Following the completion of the transaction, Bharti and Warburg Pincus will collectively own a 49 per cent stake in Haier India.

Haier Group will retain a 49 per cent ownership stake in Haier India, with the remaining stake to be held by Haier India's management team.

The new capital infusion will also enhance Haier India's competitiveness across the entire value chain, it added. *—PTI*

Axis Energy, Reliance top bidders in coal mine auctions

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Hyderabad-based renewable energy firm Axis Energy and Reliance Industries Ltd emerged as top bidders in the latest auction of coal block auctions aimed at boosting domestic coal gasification and cleaner energy production.

According to bid participant details released following the opening of technical bids, Axis Energy Ventures India Pvt Ltd and Reliance Industries Ltd jointly bid for 17 blocks in Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh, underscoring their strong strategic interest in coal gasification and downstream value-added applications.

Other bidders included Penna Enterprises, which bid for one block in Odisha. NRSK Mines and Minerals Pvt Ltd and Caliber Mining and Logistics Ltd bid for two blocks each. Sai Surya Professional Services Pvt Ltd and Singareni Collieries Co Ltd-Telangana Power Generation Corp Ltd, MMPL Commercial Mines Pvt Ltd-Mohit Minerals Ltd were the other bidders.

The government had, in October, offered a total of 41 coal mines in the 14th round of commercial auctions

The government had, in October, offered a total of 41 coal mines in the 14th round of commercial auctions, including provisions for underground coal gasification (UCG) for the first time.

Of the 41 mines, 21 were specifically identified as possessing potential for UCG.

A total of 49 bids were received for 24 of the 41 blocks. *—PTI*

Goldman Sachs pegs India's 2026 GDP growth at 6.7%

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

Global economic growth is expected to remain resilient in 2026, with India continuing to be one of the fastest-growing major economies, according to Goldman Sachs' Global Economics Analyst Report Macro Outlook 2026.

Goldman Sachs forecasts India's real GDP growth at around 6.7 per cent in 2026 and 6.8 per cent in 2027, outpacing consensus growth estimates and keeping India among the world's fastest-growing large economies.

The report said that emerging markets, including India, are expected to outperform developed peers amid stronger domestic demand and favourable structural trends.

The report projects global growth at 2.8 per cent in 2026, above the consensus estimate of 2.5 per cent, supported by stable inflation and easing monetary conditions across several economies. *—ANI*

2025 full of achievements, progress under PM: Goyal

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

The Department of Commerce concluded 2025 with significant growth in international trade and digital infrastructure, marking a year of record-breaking export figures and the finalisation of major global trade deals. Union Minister of Commerce and Industry **Piyush Goyal**'s year-end recap highlighted a shift toward automated trading platforms and a reduction in regulatory hurdles for domestic businesses.

The Minister shared these milestones on X, stating that 2025 was a "year full of achievements and progress under PM @NarendraModi ji's leadership." He noted that the government's focus remained on "concluding three FTAs to achieving record exports" while updating the highlights for Department of Commerce and the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade. India's total exports reached a new peak of USD 825.25 billion during the 2024-25 period, representing an annual growth of 6.05 per cent. The services sector contributed significantly to this total, achieving a record USD 387.54 billion.

On the global front, the government finalised three major agreements.

Domestically, the startup sector expanded to include over 2 lakh government-recognised startups, which helped create more than 21 lakh jobs. *—ANI*

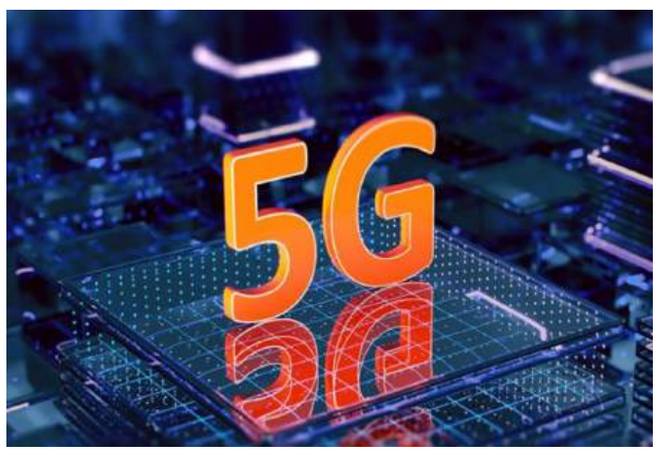
SUBSCRIBER BASE AT 1.2 BILLION

'2025 telecom growth driven by 5G, AI & mfg'

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

India's telecom sector closed 2025 on a strong footing, reinforcing its position as a central pillar of the country's digital economy, driven by rapid 5G expansion, rising data consumption, growing domestic manufacturing, and a sharper focus on resilience, security and self-reliance.

According to industry data, India's overall telecom subscriber base reached 1.2 billion by November 2025, with teledensity rising to 86.76 per cent. Wireless broadband continued to dominate with nearly 955 million users, while 5G adoption accelerated sharply, touching around 394 million subscriptions by year-end. Network rollout also gathered pace as India crossed over 5.15 lakh 5G base transceiver stations, taking average monthly data consumption to about 36 GB per user.



Highlighting the scale of infrastructure expansion, HFCL Managing Director Mahendra Nahata said the sector has reached "a critical threshold where capacity, density, and deployment speed determine competitive advantage," adding that India installed "over 5 lakh 5G base stations, achieving 85 per cent population coverage."

The year also saw steady growth in Fixed Wireless Access (FWA), with subscribers crossing 13 million, enabling faster broadband penetration across both urban and rural markets.

From a global technology standpoint, Nokia said India remains a critical manufacturing and innovation hub.

Industry leaders also pointed to a strategic shift from expansion to performance and resilience.

On the policy and manufacturing front, the sector benefited from Make-in-India and PLI schemes, enabling nearly 60 per cent import substitution in telecom products and boosting exports to Rs 18,406 crore in FY25. *—ANI*

CHENNAI STUDENTS WIN NASA AWARD FOR HOMEGROWN SATELLITE INTERNET

CHENNAI, 24 DEC

A team of Chennai-based engineering students has beaten over 18,000 projects worldwide to win the "Most Inspirational" award at the NASA International Space Apps Challenge 2025.

Their project, "Photonics Odyssey" or AakashNet, aims to bridge the digital divide in India by delivering high-speed, low-cost internet to the country's most remote villages. "AakashNet conceptually adopts the working philosophy long demonstrated by ISRO," Prasanth Gopalakrishnan, a second-year electronics and communication engineering student of SRM Easwari Engineering College, told PTI.

His winning team comprised Rajalingam N, Rashi Menon and Sakthi Sanjeev Kumar from electronics and communication engineering department as well as Deeraj Kumar and Manish Varma D from computer science engineering department, specialising in AI and Machine Learning. *—ANI*

East Bengal begins IWL title defence with a narrow win

KALYANI, 24 DEC

Reigning champion East Bengal began its Indian Women's League (IWL) title defence with a narrow 1-0 win over Sethu FC on Wednesday at the Kalyani stadium. Soumya Guguloth netted the solitary goal in the 77th minute after the forward, on the turn, sent Sulanjana Raul's layoff goalwards, beyond an outstretched goalie in Anjila Subba. The Moshal Girls returned to action just three days after winning the inaugural edition of the SAFF Women's Club Championship with a 3-0 win over Nepal's APF FC in the final. Earlier in the day, Nita Football Academy got its first win of the 2025-26 campaign, demolishing Sesa Football Academy 6-1 at the National Centre of Excellence in Kolkata. Pyari Xaxa (1', 71', 74') was in hot form, as she completed her hat-trick to help her side to the major win on Christmas Eve.—*PTI*

Tata Open golf to tee off in Jamshedpur from today

JAMSHEDPUR, 24 DEC

Over 100 professionals will be vying for the top honor in the season-ending Tata Open golf tournament, which will tee off here on Thursday.The Rs 2 crore prize money event will have a field of 126 professionals competing at the Beldih and Golmuri golf courses. The top 50 players and ties will cut into two rounds.The tournament will feature some of the top Indian professionals, such as 2025 PGTI Order of Merit champion Yuvraj Sandhu, 2024 PGTI Order of Merit champion Veer Ahlawat, Shaurya Bhattacharya, Arjun Prasad, Manu Gandas, Angad Cheema, Om Prakash Chouhan (former champion), Ajeetesh Sandhu, Rashid Khan, Khalin Joshi, and Chikkarangappa, to name a few.—*PTI*

X/@HERTNER

German footballer dies after falling from a cable car

DUBAI, 24 DEC

German footballer Sebastian Hertner, who has formerly represented his country at the youth level, passed away at the age of 34 after a ski accident. According to German media outlet Bild, Hertner was skiing at the Savn Kuk resort in northern Montenegro when he fell about 70 meters to his death.Hertner, a product of the VfB Stuttgart Academy, played for several clubs in the second and third divisions of German football for most of his 16-year professional career. He most recently captained ETSV Hamburg in the Oberliga (fifth tier).—*PTI*

PHOTO: X/@VENUS

Venus Williams weds Andrea Preti in Florida

PALM BEACH, 24 DEC

Venus Williams and Andrea Preti are married, the tennis great announced Tuesday on social media. Williams and Preti became husband and wife over the weekend in Palm Beach, Florida, as part of a five-day celebration. After becoming the second-oldest woman to win a tour-level singles match in July, the 45-year-old Williams gave thanks to her fiancé, who was in the stands at the DC Open. Preti is a Danish-born Italian model and actor, according to the website IMDB. Williams hadn't played in a tournament in 16 months until entering the event in Washington.—*PTI*

Devdutt, Ishan hand Karnataka 5-wicket win

Karnataka's decision to field seemed to have backfired first

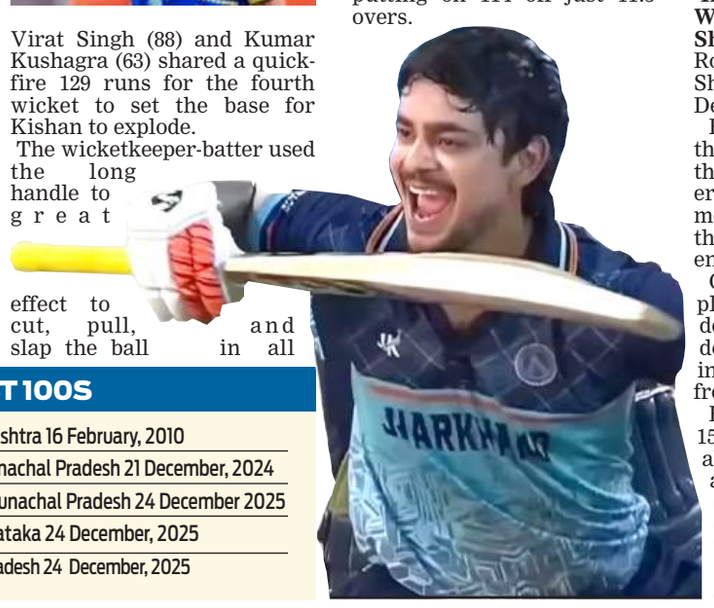
AHMEDABAD, 24 DEC

Ishan Kishan's whirlwind 39-ball 125 was eclipsed by Devdutt Padikkal's 147 as defending champions Karnataka made a winning start to the Vijay Hazare Trophy with a five-wicket victory against Jharkhand, here on Wednesday.

In a high-scoring Group A match here on Wednesday, Karnataka romped home with 15 balls to spare in the pursuit of a mammoth run chase, making 413 for five.However, **Karnataka's decision to field seemed to have backfired first** when Kishan, who recently received a call-up in India's squad for next year's T20 World Cup, cut loose as he smashed 125 off a mere 39 balls, laced with seven boundaries and as many as 14 hits over the ropes.Shikhar Mohan hit 44 runs up the order before

Virat Singh (88) and Kumar Kushagra (63) shared a quick-fire 129 runs for the fourth wicket to set the base for Kishan to explode.

The wicketkeeper-batter used the long handle to great effect to cut, pull, and slap the ball in all parts of the ground to race to his century and help Jharkhand post a commanding 412 for nine.For Karnataka, left-arm medium pacer Abhilash Shetty picked up four wickets for 72 runs.In reply, Karnataka captain Mayank Agarwal (54 off 34) and Paddikal (147 off 118) got the chase off to a flying start, putting on 114 off just 11.5 overs.



FASTEST 100S

- Yusuf Pathan 40 Baroda vs Maharashtra 16 February, 2010
- Anmolpreet Singh 35Punjab vs Arunachal Pradesh 21 December, 2024
- Vaibhav Suryavanshi 36 Bihar vs Arunachal Pradesh 24 December 2025
- Ishan Kishan 33 Jharkhand vs Karnataka 24 December, 2025
- Sakibul Gani 32 Bihar vs Arunachal Pradesh 24 December, 2025

'Hitman' Carnival: A Wednesday with Rohit Sharma

Rohit Sharma was doing Rohit Sharma things on a balmy December afternoon.

He played the swivel pull, the effortlessly lofted six down the ground, and swept the pacers from Sikkim for a good measure, as 'Hitman' lovers in the Pink City got the best present on Christmas Eve.

On a weekday, around 20,000-plus people from the city decided that the best thing to do was to watch the maestro in action — and that too for free.

His 37th List A hundred, a 155 off 93 balls, wasn't just about the quality. It was also about the entertainment quotient. It resembled a concert where fans had come to watch their favourite singer belt out one chartbuster after another. —*PTI*

VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY

Kohli, Simarjeet sparkle as Delhi down Andhra by 4 wickets

BENGALURU, 24 DEC

Star India batter Virat Kohli turned his return to the Vijay Hazare Trophy after 15 years into a grand spectacle, cracking a hundred that guided Delhi to a four-wicket victory over Andhra in their opening Group D match here on Wednesday.

Kohli (131, 101 balls) was ably supported by Nitish Rana (77, 55b) and Priyansh Arya (74, 44b) as Delhi scaled down a challenging target of 299 in 37.4 overs.

Ricky Bhui too made a century (122, 105b) to lead Andhra to 298 for eight, but that remained a bright footnote once Kohli unleashed his genius.

Pacer Simarjeet Singh (5/54) too played his part in Delhi's win with a persistent spell on a rather flat pitch. The 37-year-old was in pristine touch once he essayed a brilliant straight drive off his India teammate Nitish Kumar Reddy in the third ball he faced. The ball rocketed to the fence past a stunned Reddy.

Several other trademark shots flowed as Kohli went past 50 in 39 balls and later 100 in 83 balls with a four off pacer Shiva Narasimha Raju.

It was his 58th List A hundred and also saw him becoming the fastest batter to 16000 runs in 330 innings, well ahead of the now second-placed Sachin Tendulkar (391 innings).

His innings was not without blemishes either, as he was dropped on 32 by Saurabh Kumar at mid-on off pacer Satyanarayana Raju and then on 97 by Shaik Rasheed off Narasimha Raju.

But that in no way robbed any sheen from his coruscating knock, that underlined the rich vein of form he is in the 50-over format. —*PTI*

SR BADMINTON

TANVI, SANSKAR, AND CHAUHAN BEGIN CAMPAIGN IN STYLE

VIJAYAWADA, 24 DEC

Rising shuttlers Unnati Hooda, Tanvi Sharma, Rounak Chauhan, and Sanskar Saraswat registered convincing wins to advance in the 87th Senior National Badminton Championships here on Wednesday.

Top seed Unnati, who had a bye in the first round, hammered wildcard entrant Akanksha Matte 21-8, 21-18, while world junior championships silver medallists Tanvi began her campaign with a 21-10, 21-14 win over Asian U-15 girls singles gold medallist Shaina Manimuthu.

Guwahati Masters Super 100 champion Sanskar also began his campaign in style with a 21-11, 21-13 win over Shikhar Rallan in men's singles.

Also advancing to the next round was the experienced Aakarshi Kashyap, who defeated Asian U-17 championships silver medallist Lakshya Rajesh 21-7, 21-9, while Ashmita Chaliha got the better of Kavya Marvaniya 21-7, 21-11.

Purva Barve, seeded 16th, was the only seeded player to bite the dust as she went down 21-19, 17-21, 18-21 against M Meghana Reddy in the round of 64.

In the men's singles event, 11th seed Chauhan defeated Ranveer Singh 21-9, 21-13, while 12th seed D S Saneeth beat Ankit Mondal 21-7, 21-11 to book their spots in the next round. —*PTI*

Koneru Humpy gears up for title defence

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

World champion D Gukesh will get the opportunity to end the season on a high following an underwhelming season, while Koneru Humpy will aim to defend her title when the star-studded FIDE World Rapid and Blitz Championships get underway here on Thursday.

The season-ending gala attracts the cream of chess, and the upcoming edition will see the likes of five-time world champion Magnus Carlsen, Americans Fabiano Caruana and Wesley So, Russian GM Ian Nepomniachtchi, and India's R Praggnanandhaa, Arjun Erigaisi, and Nihal Sarin, among others, make a bid for the top purse in the Open section.

D. Gukesh, who won the world title after defeating Ding Liren in 2024, has been overshadowed this year.

The champion began 2025

with a loss to compatriot R Praggnanandhaa at the Tata Steel Chess Tournament, whose rise has earned widespread respect across the chess world, including from world No.1 Magnus Carlsen. With the World Championships scheduled next year, this is the opportunity for Gukesh to get his confidence back, and what better way than to beat the likes of Carlsen, So, and Nepomniachtchi, to name a few. —*PTI*

FINAL TWO ASHES TESTS

Problems continue for England as star bowler Jofra Archer is out

MELBOURNE, 24 DEC

Bowler Jofra Archer will not play in the remaining two Ashes tests due to a left side strain, a team official said Wednesday, adding to England's problems both on and off the field that include accusations of drunken behavior by opener Ben Duckett.

The 30-year-old Archer spent four years battling a variety of fitness issues, including stress fractures of the back and right elbow, but has been in strong form since making a long-awaited red-ball return against India.

The fourth test begins Friday at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the fifth on Jan. 4 in Sydney. Australia has a winning 3-0 lead in the five-test series and has retained the Ashes.

Archer joined the squad at training on Wednesday at the MCG, but played no part in practice, and a spokesperson later confirmed he was out for the remainder of the tour. He had bowled a total of 80 overs in the games at Perth, Brisbane, and Adelaide, taking nine wickets at 27.11 and maintaining the lowest strike-rate among England bowlers. "I've obviously reached out, spoken to him and offered my complete support throughout this, particularly in a moment like this where everything feels like it's on top of you," Stokes said. "My job as England captain is obviously to be out there and get results for the team, but also to try to give people the best chance of being in a mental space where they can go out there and perform."

England team: Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Jacob Bethell, Joe Root, Harry Brook, Ben Stokes (captain), Jamie Smith, Will Jacks, Gus Atkinson, Brydon Carse, Josh Tongue. —*PTI*

HOCKEY STAR HARDIK SINGH LONE RECOMMENDATION FOR KHEL RATNA

NEW DELHI, 24 DEC

India men's hockey team vice-captain Hardik Singh was the sole recommendation for this year's Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna honour, while teenage chess star Divya Deshmukh and trailblazing decathlete Tejaswin Shankar were among the 24 picked for the Arjuna awards by the selection committee here on Wednesday.

The 27-year-old Hardik has been India's midfield mainstay and was a part of both the 2021 Tokyo and 2024 Paris Olympic Games medal-clinching teams. This year, he was a part of India's Asia Cup gold-winning side.

First, a Yogasan athlete, Aarti Pal, has been recommended for the Arjuna award, five years after it was formally recognised by the Sports Ministry, a well-placed source told PTI.

Twenty-one other names have been finalised for the Arjuna by the awards selection panel after a meeting here on Wednesday.

The panel features, among others, Indian Olympic Association (IOA) Vice President Gagan Narang, former badminton player Aparna Popat and former hockey player M M Somaya.

The list, however, does not feature any cricketer. Pacer Mohammed Shami was the last cricketer to receive the honour in 2023.

The Khel Ratna, which is the country's highest sporting honour, comes with a medallion, a citation and a cash prize of Rs 25 lakh, while the Arjuna award makes the winner richer by Rs 15 lakh.

Last year, the Khel Ratna was bestowed on four athletes world champion chess player D Gukesh, men's hockey captain Harmanpreet Singh, para-athlete Praveen Kumar and shooter Manu Bhaker.

Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna: Hardik Singh (Hockey)

ARJUNA AWARDS:

Tejaswin Shankar (Athletics), Priyanka (Athletics), Narender (Boxing), Vidit Gujrathi (Chess), Divya Deshmukh (Chess), Dhanush Srikanth (Deaf Shooting), Pranati Nayak (Gymnastics), Rajkumar Pal (Hockey), Surjeet (Kabaddi), Nirmala Bhati (Kho Kho), Rudransh Khandelwal (Para-Shooting), Ekta Bhyan (Para-athletics), Padmanabh Singh (Polo), Arvind Singh (Rowing), Akhil Sheoran (Shooting), Mehuli Ghosh (Shooting), Sutirtha Mukherjee (Table Tennis), Sonam Malik (Wrestling), Aarti (Yoga), Treesa Jolly (Badminton), Gayatri Gopichand (Badminton), Lalremsiami (Hockey), Mohammed Afsal (Athletics), Pooja (Kabaddi). —*PTI*

CARABAO CUP SEMI-FINAL

Arsenal beat Crystal Palace on penalties

LONDON, 24 DEC

Kepa Arrizabalaga was Arsenal's League Cup quarter-final hero with the decisive penalty shoot-out save that completed a miserable evening for Crystal Palace defender Maxence Lacroix on Tuesday night.

Lacroix's own goal put Arsenal ahead with 10 minutes left at the Emirates Stadium before Marc Guehi snatched Palace's stoppage-time equaliser in the 1-1 draw. That set the stage for a shoot-out in which both teams scored their first seven penalties.

William Saliba converted Arsenal's eighth kick, and

Arsenal players celebrate after winning in a penalty shootout PHOTO: X/@ARSENAL

Kepa dived to his right to save Lacroix's effort and secure an 8-7 victory.

It was a cathartic moment for the Spanish goalkeeper, who infamously refused to be substituted before Chelsea's League Cup final penalty shoot-out defeat against Manchester City in 2019. Kepa also missed a spot-kick in the Blues' 2022 League Cup final shoot-out loss to Liverpool.

The Gunners will play London rivals Chelsea in the semi-finals over two legs in January and February, with Manchester City facing holders Newcastle in the other last four clash.

"We generated a lot and should have scored many more goals. When you don't close the games, it can always happen that you concede," Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta said. "We had some big individual performances. Kepa, his level of commitment to the group is just incredible. —*PTI*

Golfer Jumbo Ozaki dies of cancer at age 78

TOKYO, 24 DEC

Masashi "Jumbo" Ozaki, whose 113 worldwide victories were the most of any player from Japan, died Wednesday in his home country after a battle with colon cancer, the Japan Golf Tour said. He was 78.

Ozaki was revered in Japan, a big hitter with a sense of style who won 94 times over 29 years on the Japan Golf Tour, the last one coming at the 2002 ANA Open when he was 55.

He rose to No. 5 in the world ranking in 1996 at age 49. Ozaki often got overlooked for never winning outside Japan, except for the New Zealand PGA Championship. He was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2011.

"He is an indispensable, one-of-a-kind figure in discussing men's golf, both now and in the future," the tour said in a social media post.

Ozaki competed in 49 majors, his best finish coming in the 1989 U.S. Open at Oak Hill when he finished three shots behind Curtis Strange. He played the Masters for the 19th and final time in 2000 when he was 53 and tied for 28th. —*PTI*